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FUTURE

FROM FEDE ALVAREZ
DIRECTOR OF DON'T BREATHE AND EVIL DEAD
AND PRODUCER RIDLEY SCOTT

ALIEN

ROMULUS

20TH CENTURY STUDIOS PRESENTS A SCOTT FREE/BRANDYWINE PRODUCTION A FEDE ALVAREZ FILM "ALIEN:ROMULUS"
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We get our claws into *The Goodies* classic "Kitten Kong".

Captain's Log

My favourite kind of sci-fi is the type that *scares* me. Life or death stakes are all well and good, but when there's something really... alien about encounters then I'm all in. So it's little surprise that James Cameron's *Aliens* is my all-time top sci-fi movie. With that in mind, you can imagine just how excited I am about Fede Alvarez's *Alien: Romulus*. I've been lucky enough to see several sequences from the film and, well, what is it "the kids" say nowadays? We're so back. It looks absolutely *terrifying* and has *those* space corridors that just tick all my boxes.

With this, *Prey* (and its follow up) and the forthcoming *Alien* TV series, which wrapped a few weeks back, I'm ready for a whole new universe of adventures. The new Marvel comic books have been some of my favourites in recent years so I'm glad to see things stepping up to the next level once more.

In this issue we also go right back to where it all started, taking a look at the original movie in celebration of 45 years of no one hearing us scream. Plus we speak to the creators behind those comics I love so much, the writers of the ongoing book series and the people behind videogame *Alien: Rogue Incursion*. Will it be as nail-biting as *Alien: Isolation*? What do you think!

Remember, they mostly come at night – mostly. Stay safe and we'll see you in four weeks!

Darren
X

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Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ Looking forward to watching *Longlegs* for a second time and seeing it in a whole new light...

→ So pleased that *Interview With The Vampire* has been renewed for a third season.

→ Season two of *Prodigy* might be the best new *Star Trek* yet – a shame it landed on Netflix with little to no fanfare.

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ Enjoyed *A Quiet Place: Day One* a lot, even though you don't really learn anything new. But that cute cat would have been lost within five minutes. And definitely stomped or drowned later. (Sorry.)

→ *Julia*, Sandra Newman's feminist retelling of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, missed my radar last year, but I'm catching up now it's in paperback.

→ *Tripod*sheads (both of you): new book *All For Nothing?* (tripods.graphetti.co.nz) looks very promising. Review next issue, hopefully.

RANTS

→ Still traumatised by the point in my *X-Files* rewatch where I was forced to watch Assistant Director Skinner having sex.

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RANT

→ Alas, *Outer Range*, you were good while you lasted. Although apparently someone disagreed...

ED RICKETTS PRODUCTION EDITOR

RAVES

→ Heartened to see a statement from HMV that sales of Blu-rays and DVDs are going back up, thanks to people being sick of streaming price rises and ads inserted in *paid* subscriptions.

RANTS

→ *Severance* season two isn't on until January next year, despite being complete? No wonder Apple TV+ is bleeding money. (Yes, I know that doesn't make any sense, I'm just annoyed.)

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR-AT-LARGE

RAVES

→ I've been anticipating Robert Eggers's *Nosferatu* ever since interviewing him for *The Witch* – when he politely declined to talk about it. Nine years on the trailer's finally here. And it looks like a gothic dream.

→ *Batman: Caped Crusader* has sent me back to my *Batman: The Animated Series* box set. Still brilliant.

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ Colour me shocked: *The Acolyte* is my second favourite *Star Wars* series. Proves that if you give underrepresented voices in the fandom the baton, *Star Wars* can shine again. Stellar cast, and interesting things to explore.

RANTS

→ I'll be the contrarian: I'm not impressed by *Alien: Romulus* being a pastiche of the two original films, down to Spaeny looking like baby Ripley. Only upside: it does make me more excited to see Noah Hawley's original series approach.

THE FUTURE FIRST!

Red Alert

SEPTEMBER 2024

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Hare-um Scare-um

Strange secrets are unearthed in '70s Yorkshire in *Starve Acre*

Highlights

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TERMINATOR ZERO

→ They always come back, you should know this. Except this time, they're anime.

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DOCTOR WHO

→ Yaz and the Thirteenth Doctor are back, in the guise of new Big Finish audio adventures.

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PREDATOR

→ The deadly killers face another Marvel hero in the jungle – this time, Black Panther.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Growing Your Hare

Daniel Kokotajlo talks about his ’70s-set folk horror film **Starve Acre** WORDS: **IAN BERRIMAN**

LIKE SEVERAL CLASSIC examples of folk horror, *Starve Acre* centres on something being unearthed. In this case: the mysteriously well-preserved roots of an oak tree cut down centuries ago, and the bones of a hare – which then impossibly begins to regenerate. Also buried just beneath the surface, metaphorically speaking, is a tragic loss: the death of Ewan, five-year-old son of archaeologist Richard (Matt Smith) and Juliette (Morfydd Clark).

Set in rural Yorkshire in the ’70s, it’s based on a book by Andrew Michael Hurley – technically, as director Daniel Kokotajlo explains to Red Alert, *two* books. “They first released the book pretending it was an unearthed ’70s novella, under a pseudonym. That version had a bit more violence and gore, and the ending was different. So the film ended up becoming a mix of the two.”

Kokotajlo met Hurley “for a cup of tea” after a book launch, then with the author’s blessing, went away to develop the script on his own. “It was more just chatting about old British films that we love,” the director recalls. “He’s a big fan of a Nigel Kneale one-off called ‘Murrain’ [1975], so we spoke a lot about that.” A bigger influence on Kokotajlo and his cinematographer, however, was a 1975 portrait of farming life. “We were watching a lot of old folk horrors, then came across a film that *wasn’t* a folk horror: *Akenfield*, a Peter Hall film. It’s beautifully shot on anamorphic lenses, and has this rich, gothic, folkloric quality. That was our main reference.”

In adapting the story, Kokotajlo seems to have gone down a similar research path to Alex Garland, when he made the Green Man so central to 2022’s *Men*. “I came across a symbol, the three-hare symbol, that’s used in a lot of churches around England, and started looking into that and concepts of the three in old religions, like the Trinacria [a three-legged woman],” he explains.

“Even today, people don’t really know what the three-hare symbol is referencing. So I tried to devise a story around that concept of the three – building around it, still holding onto some element of ambiguity around why these things are happening.”

He was also keen to play with the Anglo-Saxon concept of “wyrd”. “It’s an old idea of fate, or a guiding spirit that moved people to a place where they should be or need to be, even if they don’t want to be.” Here, that place is the titular Starve Acre, Richard’s childhood home. “That was what I was working with: this idea that Richard returns to this place that he’s got a love-hate relationship with.”

Nailing the location was key. They found it in Nidderdale, North Yorkshire. “The house was just right, and had this wicked field that was already quite barren. It was down on a slope, and you couldn’t really see the horizon. It had this eerie quality that worked.”

The property did have its issues, mind. “It was quite remote, and cold – it was hard for the crew,” the director recalls. “We’d escape into the barn next door when the snow or the rain came. But there was a barn owl living in there that was shitting on everybody all day long!”

Even setting aside avine defecation, it must have been a gruelling shoot for Morfydd Clark, whose character is sunk in depression. “I don’t think she let it get to her,” says Kokotajlo. “We kept things light – we had music

Richard (Matt Smith), Juliette (Morfydd Clark).

Harrie (Erin Richards): séance, anyone?

Richard, digging in the dirt in all senses.

CHRIS HARRIS @HOUSE STARVE ACRE LTD

playing in-between takes. I was conscious of making sure we didn't get too fucking depressed, because the weather was pretty grim. Morfydd's really creative, and brings so much to it," he adds of the *Saint Maud* star, who's in danger of becoming a horror icon. "She loves that stuff. She is gothic and she loves folklore, and grew up on it."

He is equally enthusiastic about Matt Smith, who built his character "from the ground up" – including a specific Yorkshire accent. "It's a difficult accent, because it has this old-fashioned Alan Bennett feel. When you hear that kind of prissy Yorkshire accent now it's like, 'That's a bit stereotypical.' But we did a lot of research, and that's the way that kind of person talked." Batley-born pop star Robert Palmer provided one model. "He's a posh Yorkshireman, so we used him a bit!"

And what of the film's third "star" – that resurrected hare? "English hares are so timid, apparently they'd die from nervous shock before you could teach them anything," the director explains. So while there are glimpses of the back of a live *rabbit*, mostly it's puppetry. "I wanted to keep it as truthful, visually, to an English hare as possible," Kokotajlo adds, "Because they look creepy and ominous – gaunt and lanky."

A real hare *does* feature, however, thanks to composer Matthew Herbert, who's known for non-traditional sound sources – from toasters to coffins. "Straight away, he bought a hare skeleton and was making rhythmic percussive sounds out of it, that are in the film!" Kokotajlo reveals. Let's hope such disrespect doesn't bring down a terrible three-hare curse...

Starve Acre is in cinemas from 6 September.

> "I wanted to keep it as truthful, visually, to an English hare as possible, because they look creepy and ominous"

THE BFI SEASON

To coincide with *Starve Acre*'s release, Kokotajlo has programmed a season called **Roots, Rituals And Phantasmagoria**, which will run throughout September at BFI Southbank. Highlights include a screening of Nigel Kneale's "Murrain" (above) introduced by Andrew Michael Hurley, and Kokotajlo discussing 1977 film *The Shout* with *Enys Men* director Mark Jenkin. Other choices include *Dead Of Night*, *Little Otik* and *Eraserhead*. For more details, visit bit.ly/bfiseasons.

SCI-FACT! **Hurley came across the name Starve Acre in a book called *English Field Names*, while researching his previous novel.**

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

Parallel Doomsday

Terminator Zero creator Mattson Tomlin explains where the anime series fits within canon

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

Eiko (voiced by Sonoya Mizuno) gets gunny.

"I'LL BE BACK." FORTY YEARS after Arnold Schwarzenegger first uttered that line as the T-800 in *The Terminator*, it's been a promise fulfilled over and over. Fans of the franchise haven't had to suffer more than six years between new *Terminator* films, a television series, videogames or theme park rides. The latest spinoff is Netflix's *Terminator Zero*, the first in-canon anime series from animation studio Production IG, director Masashi Kudō and writer Mattson Tomlin.

Ironically, Tomlin was working on his own original cyborg story, *Mother/Android*, in 2020 when he was approached to pitch an idea for a *Terminator* anime series. Interested, Tomlin tells Red Alert that he was even more receptive when he was given creative carte blanche.

"I've worked on a lot of franchises and usually there are guardrails or roadblocks, and a lot of hoops to jump through," Tomlin explains. "This was the opposite. They said, 'You can do anything'."

Their one caveat was to include some kind of Japanese component to the narrative, which he was more than happy to honour. "The *Terminator* franchise has largely taken place on the US/Mexico border," he explains. "With this I could ask, 'What's going on in other places?' It was just an invitation for me to say my piece and do my own thing, without undoing or stepping on the toes of anybody that had come before me."

After watching all of the *Terminator* films again, Tomlin says he identified the unifying themes of time travel, the Terminators and how humans and machines interact in a way that changes the nuclear family. "I instantly then had to ask myself, 'Why does this *have* to be animated? Why can't this be live action?'" he says. In choosing to set the story in Tokyo, Japan, using the dual timelines in 1997 and 2022, he knew that animation would make that easier to achieve.

Tomlin also wanted to set his narrative during *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. "That's something that we've only seen in flashbacks, dreams or in apocalyptic visions," he explains. "I want to tell a story that really goes across time, and that's a lot easier to do when it's animated too."

In the 1997 timeline, Professor Malcolm Lee (André Holland) is having visions of Judgment Day and is trying to find a way to avoid it through his advanced AI work. Meanwhile in the future, Skynet is trying to change history once more with a Terminator assassin meant for Lee, which the resistance soldier Eiko (Sonoya Mizuno), travels in time to stop.

When it comes to Lee's story, which includes his three children, Tomlin says he was very inspired by *Ex Machina* in having the scientist try to program a new AI, named Kokoro (Rosario Dawson), as the answer to Skynet. "This idea of the auspices of a Turing test, and can I tell if this AI can think for themselves or not, got me thinking about programming ones and zeros and if-then statements.

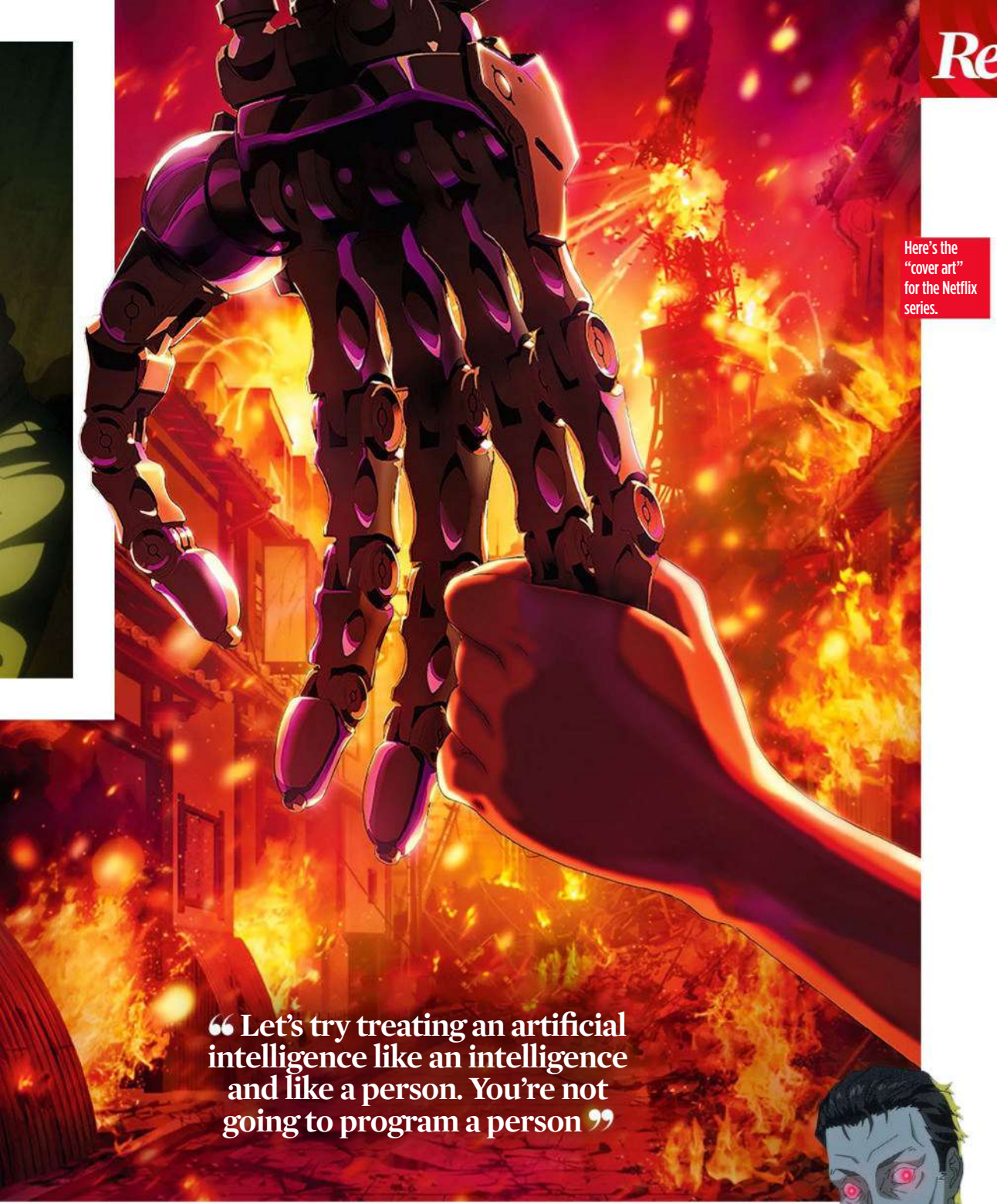
"What if those if-then statements failed us and instantly Skynet decides, 'Fuck humanity. We're gonna kill you.' So let's try treating an artificial intelligence like an intelligence and treating them like a person. You're not going to program a person. You're going to talk to them and you're going to try to win them over."

Tomlin says Lee and Kokoro's conversations essentially required him, as the writer, to answer the question of why humanity is worth saving, and come up with something that felt compelling. "The good news is that I'm a humanist, and I believe in the good in people even if I see it less and less," he says. "Some of

Timothy Olyphant voices the Terminator.

Meanwhile, André Holland voices Malcolm Lee.

Termie gets to meet some familar-looking pals.



Here's the "cover art" for the Netflix series.

> "Let's try treating an artificial intelligence like an intelligence and like a person. You're not going to program a person"

our main characters are going to do really gnarly, quote unquote bad things to each other. But it's all in the name of a deeper, more beautiful humanity. It was kind of the safety net I had for myself of making sure that I wasn't programming just nihilistic garbage."

Eiko's storyline allowed Tomlin to shake up the Kyle Reese archetype, not only with a gender change, but when it comes to the motivation behind why she goes on this suicide mission. "I wanted her to be a soldier that does go back for duty. Then, over the course of the show, there are things that are revealed, even to her," he says of her overall importance to the plot.

Asked how many seasons he sees this story going on for, Tomlin says, "From the moment that I started, I knew what the final image of the series would be. I'm not just completely winging it, season to season. There is a generational story that I want to tell here, and there's a profound place that I'm trying to go using *Terminator* to go there. I hope I'm lucky enough to do it."

Terminator Zero is on Netflix from 29 August.

SCI-FACT! ***Terminator Zero*** **director Masashi Kudō is best known for his work on the anime series** ***Bleach*****.**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

→ Bella Shepard, Kerrice Brooks and George Hawkins beaming aboard **Star Trek: Starfleet Academy**.

→ *Succession*'s Francesca Gardiner to write and showrun HBO's **Harry Potter**.

→ **Interview With The Vampire** renewed for a third season.

→ *Lockerbie*'s Jonathan Lee developing a **Van Helsing** series, set in modern day New York.

→ Prime Video cancel **Outer Range** after two seasons.

→ Jonathan Frakes to produce and direct Arthur C Clarke's **Venus Prime**.

→ Michael Bay in talks to direct Netflix adaptation of fantasy comic book **Barbaric**.

→ *What If...?*'s Matthew Chauncey to showrun season three of **X-Men '97**.

→ Tatiana Maslany stars in **The Nightbeast** as a mom having an affair with the Boogeyman in her son's closet...

→ Briana Middleton and Callum Turner are the leads in Apple TV+'s **Neuromancer**.

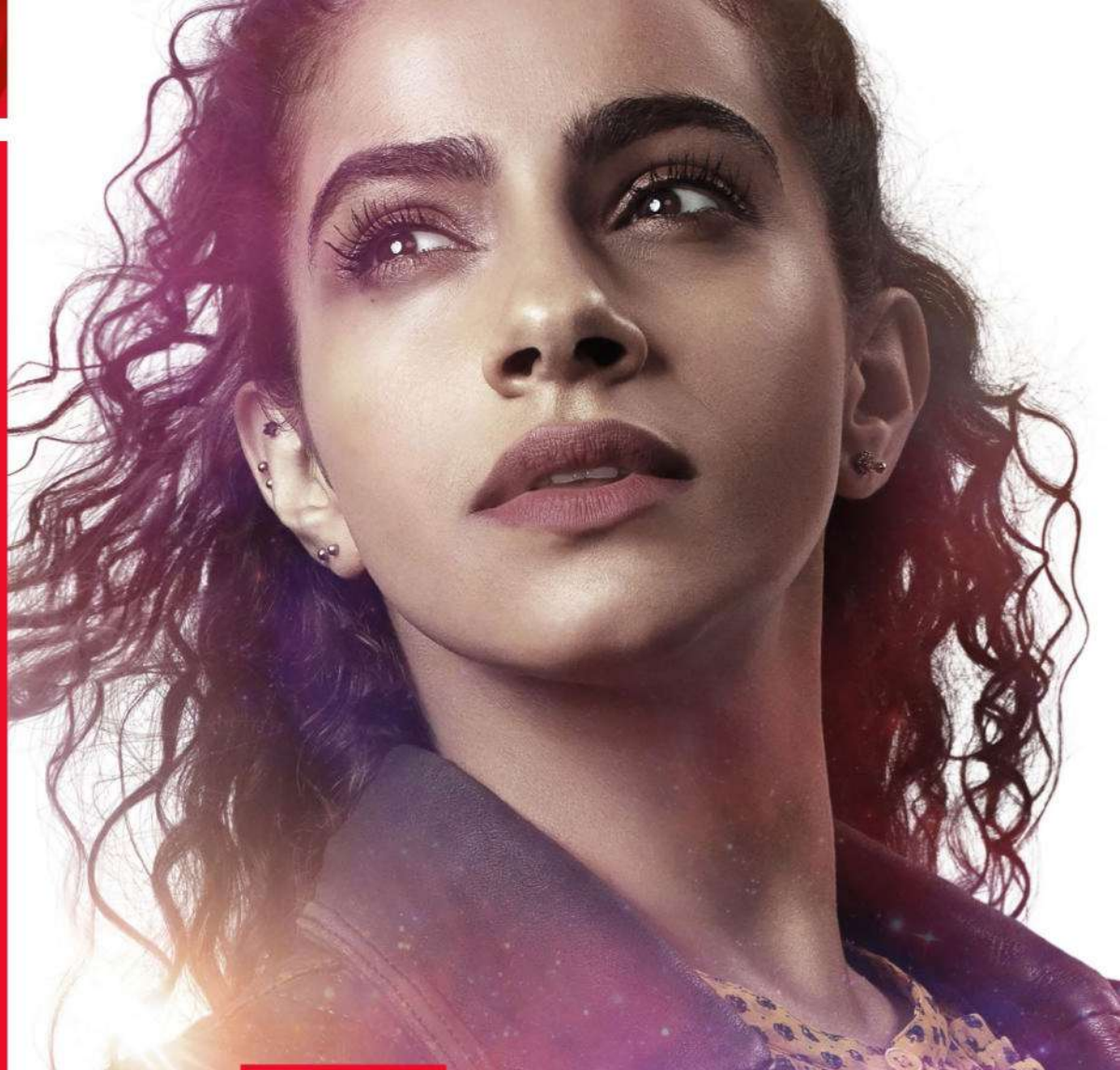
→ Steve Coogan voicing Barnabas in season two of **The Sandman**, joining new stars Jack Gleeson, Freddie Fox and Indya Moore.

RODIN ECKENROTH/GETTY IMAGES FOR HALLMARK MEDIA

Mandip Gill as Yaz on one of their first adventures.

Jodie Whittaker's Doctor goes sonic.

Best pals Mandip and Jodie in their civvies.



ACTOR EXCLUSIVE

Who Says

The Thirteenth Doctor and Yaz return – we're all ears

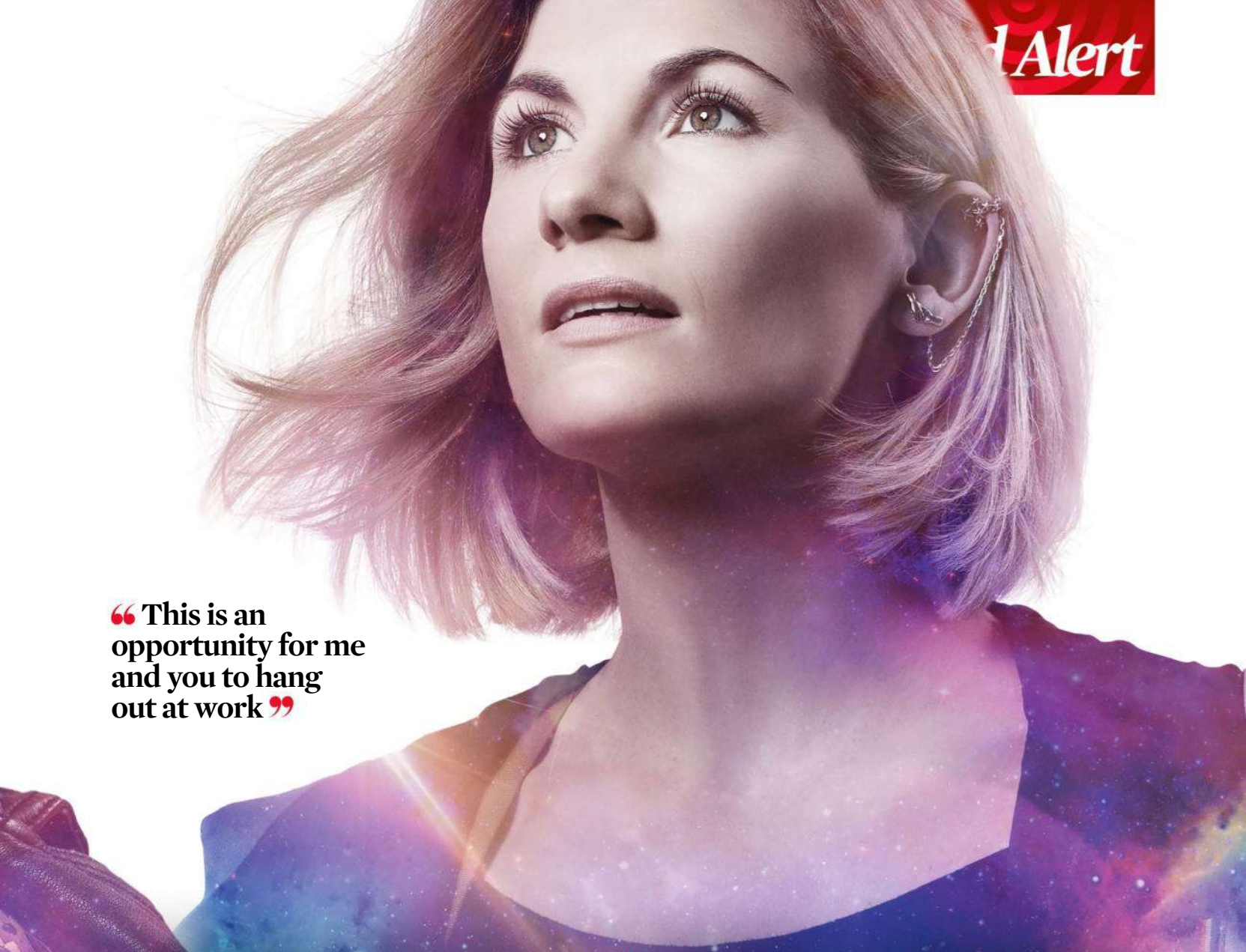
WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

SFX RECENTLY JOINED Jodie Whittaker and Mandip Gill at the Big Finish studios to celebrate their forthcoming return to *Doctor Who* in 12 new hour-long audio adventures.

You left *Doctor Who* two years ago. But did *Doctor Who* leave you?
JW and MG [in unison]: No! [Laughs]
JW: In one way you're never allowed to, but I would never let go of it anyway.
MG: You can't, can you?
JW: I'm clinging on to them coattails for the rest of my life.

Did you have any hesitation about reprising your roles on audio?
MG: We've been waiting a while. Everyone says to us, "Are you going to do Big Finish?" and I'm like, "Awkward! Because I've not been asked. When they ask, yes."
JW: We were bullied into it by the fans! [Laughs]
MG: Personally, for me it was a very easy decision. I didn't know what I was getting myself into. I'd done radio plays, I'd done audiobooks, and I totally assumed it was like an audiobook; you were in a space by yourself, reading thousands and thousands of words...
JW: Panicking!
MG: It was only when we got here on the day I was like, "Wait, there are other people?"
JW: It was amazing!
MG: We're, like, acting!
JW: The saddest thing about finishing *Doctor Who* was not seeing everybody every day. So this is an opportunity for me and you to hang out at work. And it's cheaper because we don't spend it on our phones, rinsing our phone bills talking!
MG: I've definitely enjoyed it way more than I thought.
JW: That's because you're around me, babe.
MG: Yeah, that.

Did you find it easy to slip back into character?
JW: Yeah! You're a bit nervous at first – "Oh, I can't remember how I did it", and then you realise you just say the lines! [Laughs] We needed some reining in because



> **This is an opportunity for me and you to hang out at work**

we were a bit physically animated, thinking you needed to run and jump, and then you remember there will be sound effects, you can chill out. So Mandip gets to sit down and wear her Crocs inside.
MG: Also it was written so well that you don't need to question anything. I can fully hear Yaz in the lines; the tone she takes with the Doctor and stuff like that.

What can you tease about the storylines?
JW: One's a hen do that the Doctor ruins...
MG: Oh, that's a tease!
JW: Is that a tease?
MG: No, that's the actual thing! One's 13th century. And then, how would you describe the first one?
JW: It's where the relationship between Yaz and the Doctor is challenged.
MG: Because you're challenging! We're at loggerheads because I'm like, "You need to go back and sort it out." There is a bit of a challenge. But it all fits. It's not like, "Oh my god, Yaz won't speak to the Doctor like that."

What's the best thing about working with audio?
JW: You don't learn your lines. It's really ace, I love it. Because that's the anxiety. You shoot so much [on television]; you have the responsibility. No crew member wants to sit there while you're going, "I'm so sorry, I need to say that line again!" Because you've got to move on, you're losing the light, there's only so many times a wall can explode, and you keep messing up the same line or something. Some of the language is very technical and sci-fi based, and it can be very tricky. So to read it is an absolute joy.

Have the new audio adventures captured the spirit of your television episodes?
JW: Yeah! The banter and the comfort between us two, and the natural love and bond between the Doctor and Yaz. But also, what's fun is being able to then drop these two characters in whatever environment and world. It's been Earth, it's been a different planet. But what I've really enjoyed is that they're contained stories. You get a very satisfying end of the day because you know what happens.

Who from the TV show would you like to meet on audio?
JW: Tim Shaw. That would be good. Come on, who else? You loved the P'ting but I don't know how you'd do the P'ting on audio.
MG: The obvious one would be Sacha [Dhawan], the Master.
JW: I'd quite like to have a storyline with Maestro. I think that would be really exciting, to jump forward. Or the Toymaker.

Are you prepared for *Doctor Who* being a lifetime role?
MG: That's a nice way of putting it. Lifetime role. Nobody's ever put it like that.
JW: The fandom is so loyal and passionate. You're never kicked out of the fam, and that's the thing we're now in the benefit of. We're really enjoying this. We've said goodbye to the characters for the moment and, maybe, if I keep asking in interviews, we will get put back in at some point. But even if you don't, you get to live out the Doctor and Yaz in a different medium.

The Thirteenth Doctor Adventures will be released by Big Finish Productions from July 2025.

SCI-FACT! **Joanna Lumley portrayed the first female Doctor on television, in a 1999 Comic Relief special written by Steven Moffat.**

IMAGES © OLIVER BOWRING, BIG FINISH, BBC

SCI-FACT! **Black Panther received a new costume in the recent *Predator: The Last Hunt* 4, with enhanced claws, spears and other tech.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Battle Royal

The Yautja face off against the Wakandan King in **Predator Vs Black Panther**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

The cover art for issue two, by Ken Lashley.

AFTER LAST YEAR'S *PREDATOR VS Wolverine*, there were many Marvel heroes that writer Benjamin Percy could have matched up with the formidable alien hunters. Stating that "this one made sense for several reasons", he found the ideal adversary for the Predators in the Black Panther, whose homeland of Wakanda's rich mineral wealth proved to be enticing spoils for the victor.

"The Yautja fetishise their weapons and tech, so the rarity and power of Vibranium would make the Great Mound the equivalent of Fort Knox, a cosmic treasure trove they would feel compelled to heist," Percy tells Red Alert. "Also the shield perimeter of Wakanda not only feels familiar to Yautja cloaking technology, but if controlled by their forces could make the kingdom into one big hunting preserve."

With Percy describing him as "a badass", T'Challa is a very different opponent compared to Wolverine. "He's an incredible warrior – aided by his suit – and if Logan is controlled by his guts, Black Panther pilots from his head," he says. "He's strategic, reserved and bound by an honourable duty to his ancestors and his kingdom. Battling the Yautja will be more about saving others than saving himself, and he'll engage with them as if playing a brutal game of chess."

As Percy says, "everyone loves to see Predators in a jungle", and Wakanda's verdant surroundings are reminiscent of the South American rainforest of 1987's original *Predator* film. "Whenever I write a legacy character, I'm trying to honour history while also putting my own stamp on the story," continues Percy. "The jungle environment will feel comfortable and correct to *Predator* fans, but the technology of the kingdom and the strength of the Wakandans will allow for some fresh twists on the familiar."

Promising that "some familiar faces will appear in the series including one who is not a Wakandan", Percy explores both Wakandan and Yautja royalty, delving into the story of the Predator King and his two sons. This will "resonate thematically" with Black Panther's own history, as the story harks back to T'Challa's classic conflict with Killmonger for the Wakandan throne. Although *Predator Vs Wolverine* took place over a century and involved several global locations, this four-parter occurs in one main setting over a much shorter space of time. "I don't like to rinse and repeat, so this will not have the same structure as *Wolverine*," says Percy. "This story takes place at a sprint and has a laser-sharp focus on Wakanda."

Predator Vs Black Panther is illustrated entirely by Chris Allen, whom the writer proclaims as comic book royalty. "Chris is a king!" he says. "I'm in awe of his art as Chris puts so much care and detail into every page. Predators are notoriously difficult to draw, and he has given every one of them their unique arsenal and look. His pages are so dynamic and his acting is so damned visceral!"

Predator Vs Black Panther is out on 21 August.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Symbiotic Smackdown

Family feuds – and goo – are at the heart of Marvel's latest crossover, **Venom War**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

IN ANTICIPATION OF *VENOM: THE LAST DANCE* HITTING the big screen, Al Ewing is bringing his three-year stint scripting the symbiotic anti-hero's flagship monthly to a head with his own blockbuster crossover. Illustrated by Iban Coello, *Venom War* pits original host Eddie Brock against his son, Dylan Brock, who has also previously bonded with the parasitic alien.

"The plan with Venom has always been to bring the Eddie and Dylan halves of the book into conflict with each other," says Ewing, who co-wrote the 2021 version of *Venom*'s first 12 issues with Ram V. "The exact nature of that conflict has evolved as I've had more time with the book, but *Venom War* has been on the cards in one form or another since the book started, and as it drew closer it became clear that it'd be very much 'event-shaped' in the way Marvel readers understand that."

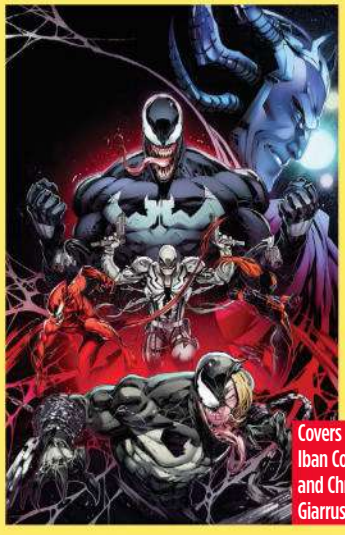
According to Ewing, Eddie and Dylan "have definitely got a strained relationship, thanks almost entirely to Eddie", and the five-parter exacerbates their bitter rift. "He's been doing his best, but deep down Eddie's self-loathing is affecting his ability to be a proper dad," says Ewing. "He's absented himself from the equation, trusting that that's the best thing he can do for his son – he's a danger to people, after all – while Dylan desperately wants him to come back and explain himself. Put like that, without mentioning all the goo and weirdness, it feels like an all too familiar story."

With other symbiotes and superheroes including Carnage and Spider-Man being drawn into the widening conflict, Ewing surprisingly drew inspiration for the various smackdowns from his favourite new sport. "I got into wrestling pretty significantly when I was plotting this out, so it takes the form of a wrestling match," he laughs. "Everything revolves around the ring and who's in it, but radiating out from the central fight are various aftereffects that cause the kind of wider-scale problems you need in a big event like this. The spanner in the works is Meridius, Eddie's evil alternate future self, who has got big plans and Eddie's squabble with his son is his opportunity to implement them."

From Cavan Scott and Juan José Ryp's *Venom War: Zombiotes* to Erica Schultz and Luciano Vecchio's *Venom War: Venomous*, which features a symbiotic Black Widow, Ewing is liaising with the creators of the numerous spin-off titles. "The tie-ins provide something for everyone, from corporate espionage to trans-temporal war games and even a zombie outbreak," teases Ewing. "I'm reading what the other creatives put out and trying to make sure there aren't any major conflicts. But at the same time, the last thing I want to do is pin creators down to anything. I've mostly offered starting points in the structure rather than strict endpoints, so people are taking things in a lot of wild directions."

Describing him as "the total package", Ewing is also enjoying collaborating with Coello. "He's great with character and fantastic with action, which a crossover like this is all about," he says. "And I've had a lot of fun including cool wrestling stills in the script."

Venom War issue one is out on 7 August.



Covers by Iban Coello and Chris Giarrusso.

Promo art and covers for two issues, by Philip Tan.

SCI-FACT! **Created by Al Ewing, Ram V and Bryan Hitch, Eddie's evil offshoot Meridius debuted in Free Comic Book Day 2021's *Venom*.**

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Wraith Of Khan

B meets the great Genghis in Keanu Reeves, Matt Kindt and Ron Garney's new **BRZRKR** comic WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

WHILE THE CHINA MIÉVILLE co-written novel *The Book Of Elsewhere* has recently been published, the original *BRZRKR* team of writers Keanu Reeves and Matt Kindt and artist Ron Garney are also returning to the immortal warrior's comic book adventures in new one-shot *The Lost Book Of B*, which acts as an epilogue to the trio's 2021 12-parter.

"Keanu and I jumped right into this story after finishing the main series," Kindt tells Red Alert. "We were on a roll and it was a good way to make it feel like it was all over. As a result, it serves as a great coda to the main series – a flashback that informs the present day and everything you've already read. I'm pretty sure that Ron needed a break, so we kind of banked this story and waited for his batteries to recharge."

"Truth be told, we always hinted with each other that there would be more down the road," adds Garney. "This is the next step in that evolution – to create more stories that have yet to be told. What's fresher about this is that it's not an exclusive origin story as much as it's a singular story about a specific time and place in B's life, and there are many. I mean, he's 80,000 years old!"

ASK REEVES

Kindt and Garney's creative partnership with Reeves has also progressed over time. "Keanu and I have just become more comfortable with each other," says Kindt. "We've definitely developed a shorthand over the years, and some inside jokes that helped us make the story better and the scripts flow easier.

"It was a ton of work, but we love working and creating and we're always willing to do whatever it takes to make the comics as good as they can be. When you've got that mindset, everything just becomes easier as you go. You build up that trust that the other guy is going to be there and is thinking about the story as much as you are."

"Keanu is just as invested as he's always been, as I'd expect, and as all three of us still are," continues Garney. "It's his baby, and he cares about it. Of course, he's crazy busy, so on this particular story it's a bit more spread-out and it's a one-shot, so we're trying to get through it and tell the best story possible."

Set during the 1200s, *The Lost Book Of B* sees B deployed as the ultimate weapon by notorious Mongolian warlord Genghis Khan. "We haven't just jumped back to an interesting time in history," says Kindt. "It was considered, and it directly feeds into the lore and mythology of the present day as we finally get to see how the cult of B was born and how they operate, and how all of that informed B's future and present."

"There's a couple of references to a previous relationship, although not exclusively in a story-driven sense," adds Garney. "It's extremely interesting for the potential that's there, as my imagination is always coming up with ideas as I'm working."

KHAN, YOU DIG IT?

According to Kindt, B is constantly evolving as a character. "Who he is now in the present series isn't necessarily who he was 100 years ago or a 1,000 years ago or more, so it was fun to see an earlier incarnation of him and see where his mind is at," he says.

"I don't want to spoil too much, but the arc of this story is not what you might imagine. There's a lot of destruction, of course! But it definitely takes a twist at the end. We're not rewriting history but it's been a fun challenge to fold B into what we know happened."

"There's lots and lots of figure drawing and lots of referencing!" adds Garney. "I'd mentioned to Keanu and Matt that I loved doing period pieces and so, sadistically speaking, they said, 'Okay, you want it, you got it!' I kid you, though – it was a gas when it all came together, and I've been playing with a very hatched inking style to give it an old 13th century flavour as best I can."

Garney also researched his subject as best he could. "With Khan himself, there are many different visual depictions of what he looked like, so I had to come up with a general sense based on an amalgam of what I could find."

BRZRKR: The Lost Book Of B is out on 21 August.

One of the variant covers for *The Lost Book of B.*

SCI-FACT! **A *BRZRKR* film is in development at Netflix with a screenplay by *Terminator Zero*'s Mattson Tomlin.**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

→ The Schwartz awakens! Josh Gad to write and direct a sequel to Mel Brooks's '80s SF spoof **Spaceballs**.

→ Will Smith starring in dystopian thriller **Resistor**, based on Daniel Suarez's novel *Influx*.

→ Grant Sputore directing the next **Monsterverse** movie, arriving 26 March 2027.

→ Ryan Coogler producing adaptation of time-travelling assassins graphic novel **A Vicious Circle**.

→ Sam Raimi returning to horror with castaway chiller **Send Help**.

→ Travis Knight directing stop-motion version of Susanna Clarke's **Piranesi**.

→ Blumhouse's *M3GAN* to get spin-off **SOULM8TE**.

→ The fourth and final **The Conjuring** set for 5 September 2025 release.

→ Chad Stahelski's Henry Cavill-starring **Highlander** reboot begins filming in January.

→ *All Quiet On The Western Front* helmer Edward Berger rumoured to be frontrunner for the next Bond movie.

→ Jennifer Lawrence in A24's adaptation of graphic novel *Why Don't You Love Me?*

JEFF SPICER/BAFTA/GETTY IMAGES FOR BAFTA

SCI-FACT! **A graphically violent cover of "Kids Rule OK", drawn by Carlos Ezquerra, led to a public backlash that contributed to *Action*'s demise.**

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Back In Action

The '70s weekly goes back to its roots with "Kids Rule OK" and "Death Game"

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

IN ADDITION TO SECOND WORLD War German tank commander "Hellman Of Hammer Force" and ultra-violent secret agent Dredger, the short-lived but infamous UK weekly *Action* – along with its successor *Battle Action* – included some key sci-fi strips, including the Rollerball-esque "Death Game 1999" and post-apocalyptic drama "Kids Rule OK".

Now both are returning for the 10-issue third volume of Rebellion's revived *Battle Action*, starting in issue one with "Kids Rule OK" by *Saga* writer Brian K Vaughan and artist Chris Burnham. As Americans, neither were familiar with *Action* before being approached by Garth Ennis, who scripts a continuing Johnny Red story in each issue.

THE KIDS AREN'T ALRIGHT

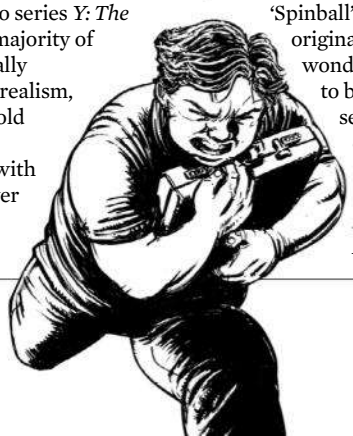
Set in a dystopian London where the adults have all died off, the 14-pager is told from the perspective of a young American visitor, who's chased by a gang of xenophobic British punks. "It was surprisingly easy for me to put myself in the shoes of our new character, a spoiled kid from the States," laughs Vaughan. "Our story also takes place in the 1980s and kind of happens between the panels of the original comic, as created by the eerily prescient Chris Lowder and Mike White."

"The original 'Kids Rule OK' was set in the distant future of 1986," adds Burnham. "Our more modern take is set in the distant past of 1986, so we were able to get the outfits right!"

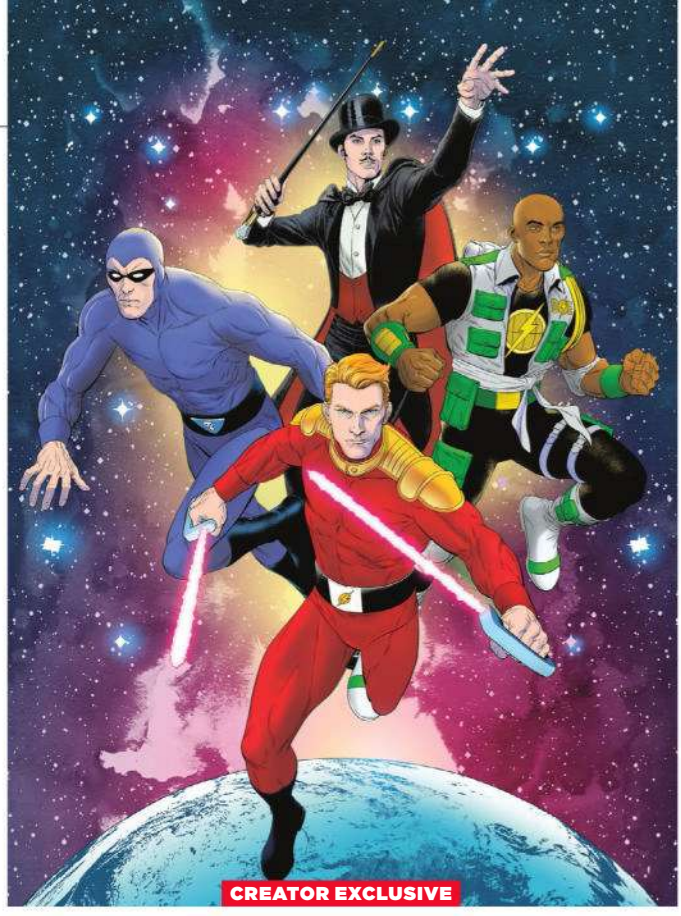
With its dystopian scenario, "Kids Rule OK" is strangely similar to Vaughan and artist Pia Guerra's long-running Vertigo series *Y: The Last Man*, which takes place in a society where the majority of males have perished. "'Kids Rule OK' took a potentially cartoonish premise and handled it with unflinching realism, no matter what unpleasant corridors the creators' bold concept led them down," says Vaughan.

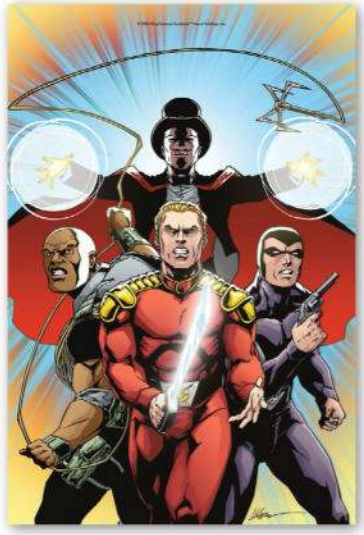
"Pia and I tried to accomplish something similar with *Y: The Last Man*, but I'm grateful that I didn't discover 'Kids Rule OK' until after we'd finished our own plague story as I would have been massively intimidated by everything Lowder and White had managed to accomplish or get away with 25 long years before Yorick and co."

"Death Game" is scheduled for January's issue six. "I was absolutely a reader of 'Death Game 1999' and 'Spinball' – and the likes of 'Mean Arena' in *2000 AD* – and there are actually a couple of sly sidelong references to those other future sports along with a sneaky dig at how 'Spinball' was a cleaned-up, sanitised version of the brutal original," says writer Dan Abnett. "The new story, with wonderful art by Tom Foster, isn't a reinvention as we've tried to be as true to the original 'Death Game' as possible. It's a sequel or a continuation of sorts that's almost like an epilogue to the original. Our main character is poor old [Joe] Taggart [from the original strip], who's still unable to escape from the life sentence of Death Game."



Battle Action issue one is out on 28 August.





Earth's Mightiest Heroes

Flash Gordon, the Phantom, Mandrake the Magician and Lothar reunite in Mad Cave's new **Defenders Of The Earth**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AFTER LAUNCHING its new *Flash Gordon* series, Mad Cave Studios is now bringing back the team book that unites the space hero with King Features Syndicate's other newspaper strip protagonists. Based on the 1986 cartoon, *Defenders Of The Earth* partners Flash with the diverse talents of the Phantom, Mandrake the Magician and his assistant Lothar.

"The fact that they're so different in powers and abilities forces you to devise stories and threats that pull them all together," says writer Dan DiDio. "The animated series is a great starting point because it used the threat of Ming the Merciless to unite them. Our series picks up on that thread and examines the bond that holds them together."

"Visually, they're all distinct from one another," adds artist Jim Calafiore. "I've tried to give them different attitudes and movements, even with their resting faces. For example, the Phantom is a very serious and dour character so he's not smiling a lot, while Mandrake is not a hand-to-hand fighter so I've tried not to action-pose him too much."

The first issue leads directly on from the conclusion of the TV show. "Once I had the initial premise, I went back and watched the series to find elements to incorporate into the story," explains DiDio. "By the time I started the first script, a number of the characters and plot points from the series were weaved into the overall story so that this book could feel like a natural extension of the series."

We can also expect to see several members of the TV show's supporting cast. "The important part of *Defenders Of The Earth* is not only the relationship between the four heroes but with them and the four kids – who are now older, which should give this book a distinctive point of view," says DiDio, referring to Flash's son Rick Gordon, the Phantom's daughter Jedda Walker, Mandrake's adopted son Kshin and Lothar's son LJ. "Rick plays an important part, as do all the characters unique to the animated show. Our story starts on the final day of their war with Ming, and in the years that follow, each character deals with the emotional challenges and responsibilities as they wrestle with the future of a changed world. Their pasts will definitely play a part in how they prepare for the future as threats from the series continue and force the team to unite again."

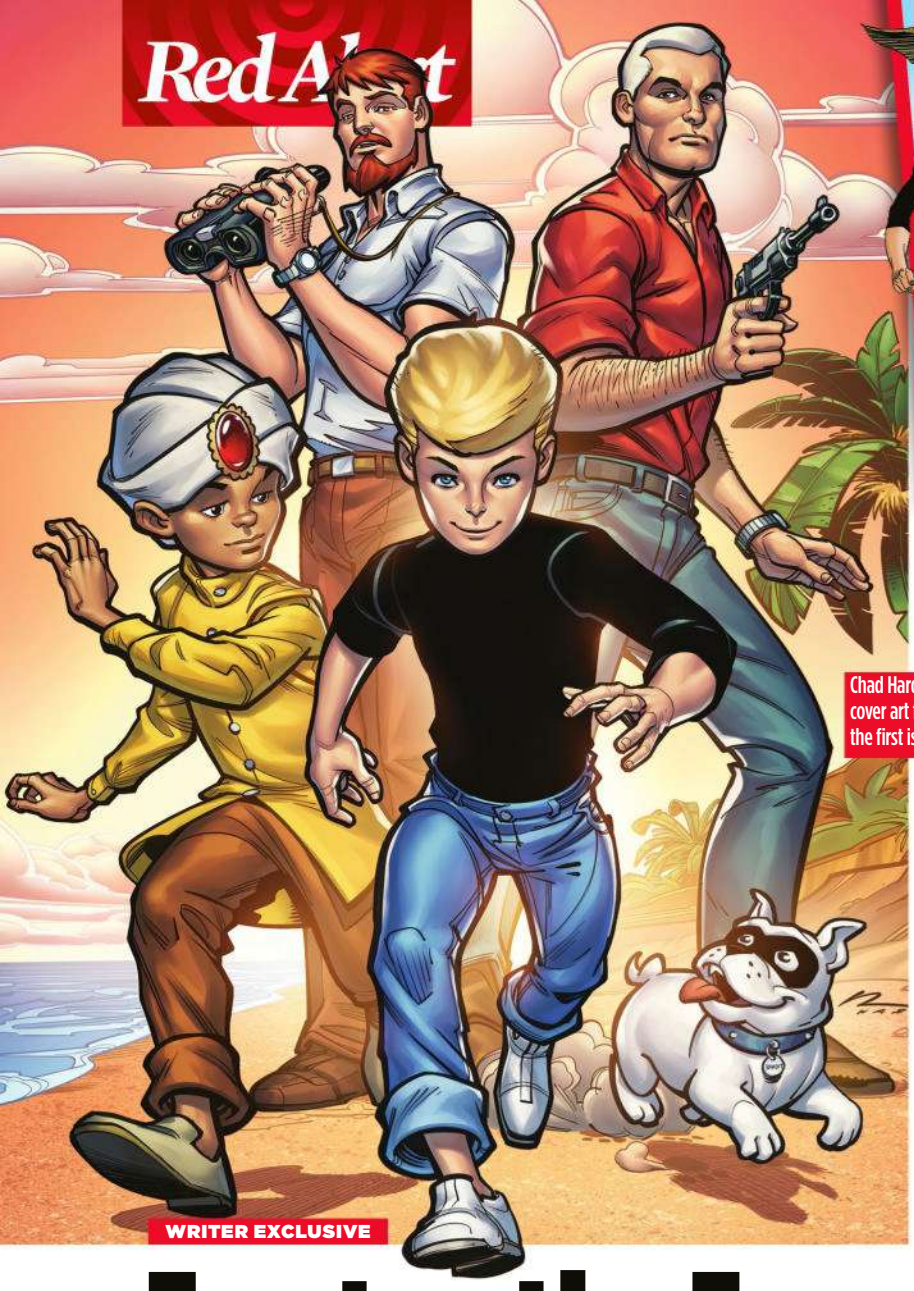
"Rick, LJ, Jedda and Kshir – along with a certain fuzzy alien – are all equal stars of this book," adds Calafiore, alluding to Kshin's extraterrestrial companion Zuffy, who was found by Rick Gordon on Ming's homeworld Mongo. "We will also see some threats from the show return to cause some havoc as well."

Calafiore says he has made the most changes in his depiction of the four teenagers, whose appearances have dated in the intervening decades. "The show was done in the '80s and their look and hairstyles are very '80s!" he laughs. "But for the big four, I kept close to what was established."

Defenders Of The Earth issue one is out on 14 August.

An issue one cover, by Djordje Djokovic.

SCI-FACT! **Mad Cave collected Marvel's 1986 *Defenders Of The Earth* series, published under their children's imprint Star Comics.**



Chad Hardin's cover art for the first issue.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Fantastic Four

Dynamite Entertainment's new **Jonny Quest** comic is a family affair

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

THE LATEST RELEASE IN Dynamite Entertainment's Warner Animation line, *Jonny Quest* doesn't take place on an alien planet or in outer space like its predecessors *ThunderCats* and *Space Ghost*, but in the distant past. Set in 1964 – the same year that the cartoon first aired on the ABC Network – some time travel might be involved as Jonny and his companions return to their Palm Key island base after being caught in a strange storm... only to encounter a rusted doppelganger of their ship, the Sea Quest.

"Without spoiling too much, the answer to that particular question is... maybe," says writer Joe Casey, who also refuses to reveal the identity of the ominous figure glimpsed on the last page of the recent Free Comic Book Day issue.

"I can't say too much, although classifying that mystery character as a 'villain' might be a bit premature," he adds. "But rest assured, if the Quest family has an actual arch-nemesis, I can absolutely guarantee that character will show up."

With young Jonny joined by his father Dr Benton Quest, his adopted brother Hadji, and their bodyguard Race Bannon (plus faithful dog Bandit), Casey is emphasising the feelings that exist between the cast members. "These characters have always had a strong family vibe, as unconventional as this family might be," he says. "I think both viewers and readers respond – sometimes even just subconsciously – to the way these guys have each other's backs, as they've got a bond that can't be broken. The trick to a good Jonny Quest story is coming up with something that can test those bonds on a character level, and this book goes further with those familial relationships than any previous iterations of *Jonny Quest* ever has."

While the core team is entirely male, Casey promises that they will cross paths with "a pretty popular female character that's an important part of the Jonny Quest mythos" in issue three. "We will definitely be dealing with her in a very specific way," he teases, also acknowledging that the Sea Quest's voyages to faraway lands now need to be seen in a fresh light, as does the friendship between Jonny and streetwise Indian orphan Hadji Singh.

"Exploration has always been part of the Jonny Quest concept, and it's a big part of the DNA of our series too," says Casey. "But the types of exploration might be slightly different – in certain areas – than anything these characters have experienced before.

"As for Jonny and Hadji, we'll be taking that particular relationship somewhere that no one will be able to predict. They're basically brothers, but brotherhood is something that is often severely tested, especially in battlefield conditions."

Casey also praises artist Sebastián Piriz for channelling the work of *Jonny Quest* creator Doug Wildey.

"We're both committed to continuing that specific Doug Wildey/Alex Toth sensibility of the original show. If you love the look of the show, you'll love the look of this book."

SCI-FACT! **Before creating Jonny Quest, Doug Wildey drew Westerns like *Outlaw Kid* for Marvel forerunner Atlas Comics.**

Who's Who? Ncuti Gatwa visits Madame Tussauds.

SFX

SPACE AND TIME

NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF DOCTOR WHO

◆ At the time of going to press, *Doctor Who* was expected to have a large presence at San Diego Comic-Con, including a Hall H panel featuring Russell T Davies, Ncuti Gatwa and Millie Gibson called "Into The Whoniverse". An episode of the official podcast was also due to be recorded, alongside a joint panel with *Star Trek* showrunner Alex Kurtzman. An exhibition of items from both series was also planned – we'll have more details next issue.

◆ **Season one is due for release on Blu-ray and DVD on 12 August. A seven-disc set, it will include the Christmas 2023 special "The Church On Ruby Road", as well as all the related episodes of behind-the-scenes show *Doctor Who Unleashed*. It will also feature exclusive special features.**

◆ Artwork for *Doctor Who: The Collection – Season 25* has been released. The set, due for release in October, will feature new extended versions of all four stories, as well as a wealth of new bonus features.

◆ **The *Doctor Who* exhibit at Madame Tussauds in London opened on Friday 19 July, featuring a waxwork of Fifteenth Doctor Ncuti Gatwa, the TARDIS and a London skyline featuring UNIT Tower. Gatwa said: "It's been amazing to work with Madame Tussauds London's artists, what incredible artists they all are. I hope when fans see the figure and the set they feel that they are part of the Whoniverse, that everyone is welcome and they can step into the TARDIS and hop off on an adventure."**

The Fifteenth Doctor's figure will be on display at Madame Tussauds London's new Baker Street Studios film and TV zone.

◆ New official books have been announced. *The Time Travelling Almanac* by Simon Guerrier is published 3 October. Puzzle book *Doctor Who: Whodle* is released on 17 October. *The Gold Archive: Invasions Of Earth: A Secret History* by Mike Tucker and Steve Cole is out on 31 October.

◆ **Big Finish will stage a live performance of new audio drama *The Stuff Of Legend*. Starring Paul McGann, India Fisher, Alex Macqueen and Nicholas Briggs, it will take place at London's Cadogan Hall on 14 September. The story will also be available digitally and on CD on the same day. Visit bigfinish.com for details.**

◆ Also announced by Big Finish – aside from a new Thirteenth Doctor range, see page 10 – are a selection of new releases.

The New Adventures Of Bernice Summerfield: The Eternity Club is a series of four full-cast audio dramas, each comprising two half-hour episodes, due to be released monthly from September to December.

Derek Jacobi will star in *The War Master: Future Phantoms*, a box set of four spine-chilling dramas due for release in November.

Also in November, Jo Martin makes her Big Finish debut in the long-awaited *Once And Future: Coda: The Final Act*, the conclusion to the Big Finish 60th anniversary special.

She is joined by Jonathon Carley as the War Doctor, replacing the sadly deceased John Hurt.

Marking 50 years since the debut of the Fourth Doctor, *The Curse Of Time* reunites characters from season 12 and ties into the pre-existing storyline. The four-part adventure is due for release in December.

◆ **Edsel will release *Doctor Who: The Tom Baker Collection* on 6 September. The four-disc deluxe gatefold CD set includes "Genesis Of The Daleks", "Doctor Who And The Pescatons", "Exploration Earth: The Time Machine", "State Of Decay" and a selection of BBC radio interviews with Tom Baker from the '70s and '80s.**

Doctor Who is on BBC iPlayer (UK) and Disney+ (globally).

SCI-FACT! **Madame Tussauds featured in episode four of 1970 story "Spearhead From Space".**

SCI-FACT! **Donald Sutherland was reportedly in the frame to play the Doctor in a *Doctor Who* movie in the late '80s.**

THE FINAL FRONTIER

DONALD SUTHERLAND 1935-2024

Remembering cinema's most magnetic misfit

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

DONALD SUTHERLAND OFTEN recalled his first big-screen audition, turning early humiliation into chat show gold. "We cannot give the role to you," the filmmakers said. "We feel the character is a kind of guy next door... You don't look like you've ever lived next door to anyone."

"It's the story of my life," Sutherland rued, but his career weaponised those rangy, unconventional looks, made a box office virtue of that offbeat charisma. Born in New Brunswick, Canada, he survived childhood brushes with polio, hepatitis and rheumatic fever to graduate with a double major in drama and engineering.

Moving to London in 1957, he studied acting at LAMDA, going on to appear in Italian horror *The Castle Of The Living Dead* (1964). Small roles followed in *The Avengers*, *The Champions* and 1965 Amicus portmanteau *Dr Terror's House Of Horrors*. "I was always cast as an artistic homicidal maniac," Sutherland remembered. "But at least I was artistic!"

While quirkily magnetic turns in *The Dirty Dozen* (1967) and *MASH* (1970) made him a mainstream star in a Hollywood that now welcomed unorthodox leading men, Sutherland's inherent otherworldliness found a perfect fit in genre fare. He was a grief-haunted father in 1973's oblique, unsettling *Don't Look Now* and a heroic health inspector in 1978's paranoia-soaked *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers* – a film whose unforgettably chilling final shot is powered entirely by his face.

Later genre credits included 1992's *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, 1994's Heinlein adaptation *The Puppet Masters* and 2004's *Frankenstein* and *Salem's Lot*. The role of despotic President Coriolanus Snow in 2012's *The Hunger Games* and its three sequels made him an icon to a whole new generation.

Once asked if he could imagine not working, Sutherland replied "I do imagine it. It's called dying, and I try not to imagine too much."

Donald Sutherland in *Don't Look Now*.

STUDIO CANAL/SHUTTERSTOCK

SHANNON DOHERTY 1971-2024

American actor and director who played Prue Halliwell in *Charmed*.

SHELLEY DUVALL 1949-2024

American actor whose genre credits included *The Shining*, *Time Bandits* and *Popeye*.

NEW AUTHOR

RILEY AUGUST

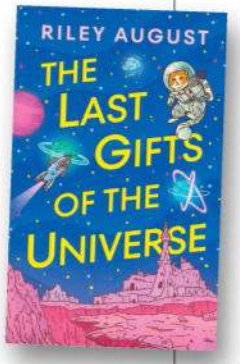
MEET THE WRITER BEHIND SCI-FI ROMP *THE LAST GIFTS OF THE UNIVERSE*

RAFAEL RODRIGUES PHOTOGRAPHY

Tell us about your protagonist.
→ Scout is an Archivist exploring the dead civilisations of the cosmos for their last gifts – useful technology, important rituals and any clues that hint at the cause of their demise.

There's a cat in a spacesuit on the cover! We need to know everything about this, please.
→ That's Pumpkin! He's Scout's favorite little guy, a real fluffy scamp who often saves the day (as long as it gets him treats).

Did the book have any particular inspiration?
→ *Last Gifts* explores themes of death and finding meaning; I came up with the idea during the Covid pandemic as I searched for my own purpose during that difficult time.



How long did it take to write?
→ The idea lived in my head for almost a year before I put pen to paper, and then it took a year longer to actually write. It definitely evolved, but the heart was there from the start.

Are there any particular writers whom you consider inspirations?
→ Oh, *so* many. To name a few: VE Schwab, Alix E Harrow, Adam Silvera, Kurt Vonnegut, Ursula Le Guin, Patrick Ness, and Noriko Ogiwara.

Any advice for *SFX* readers who are would-be writers?
→ Chase your passion. No matter how weird, how subversive, how unmarketable – write your whole, weird little heart. Your passion will always come through. That's art.

The Last Gifts Of The Universe Is out on 5 September, published by Del Rey.

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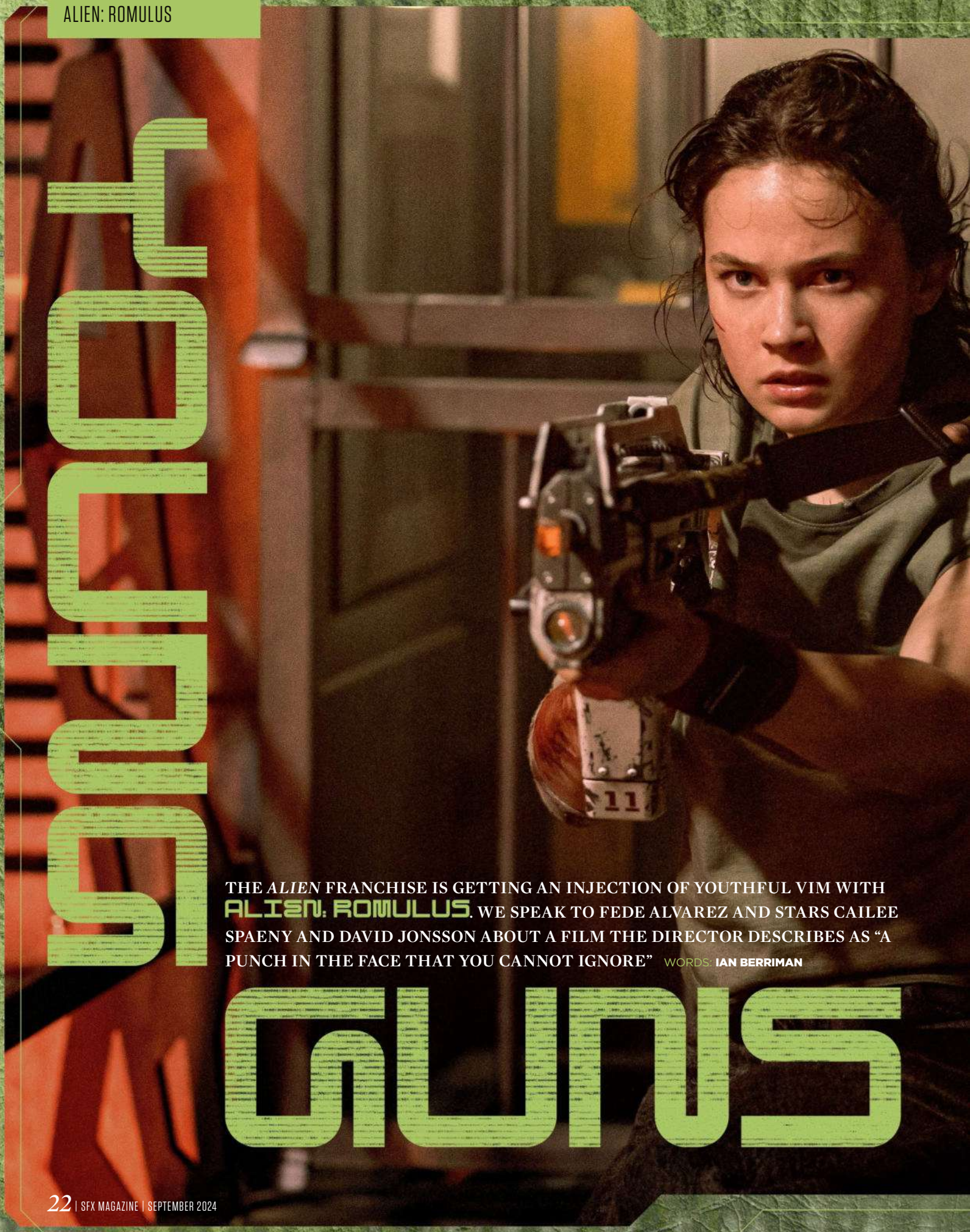
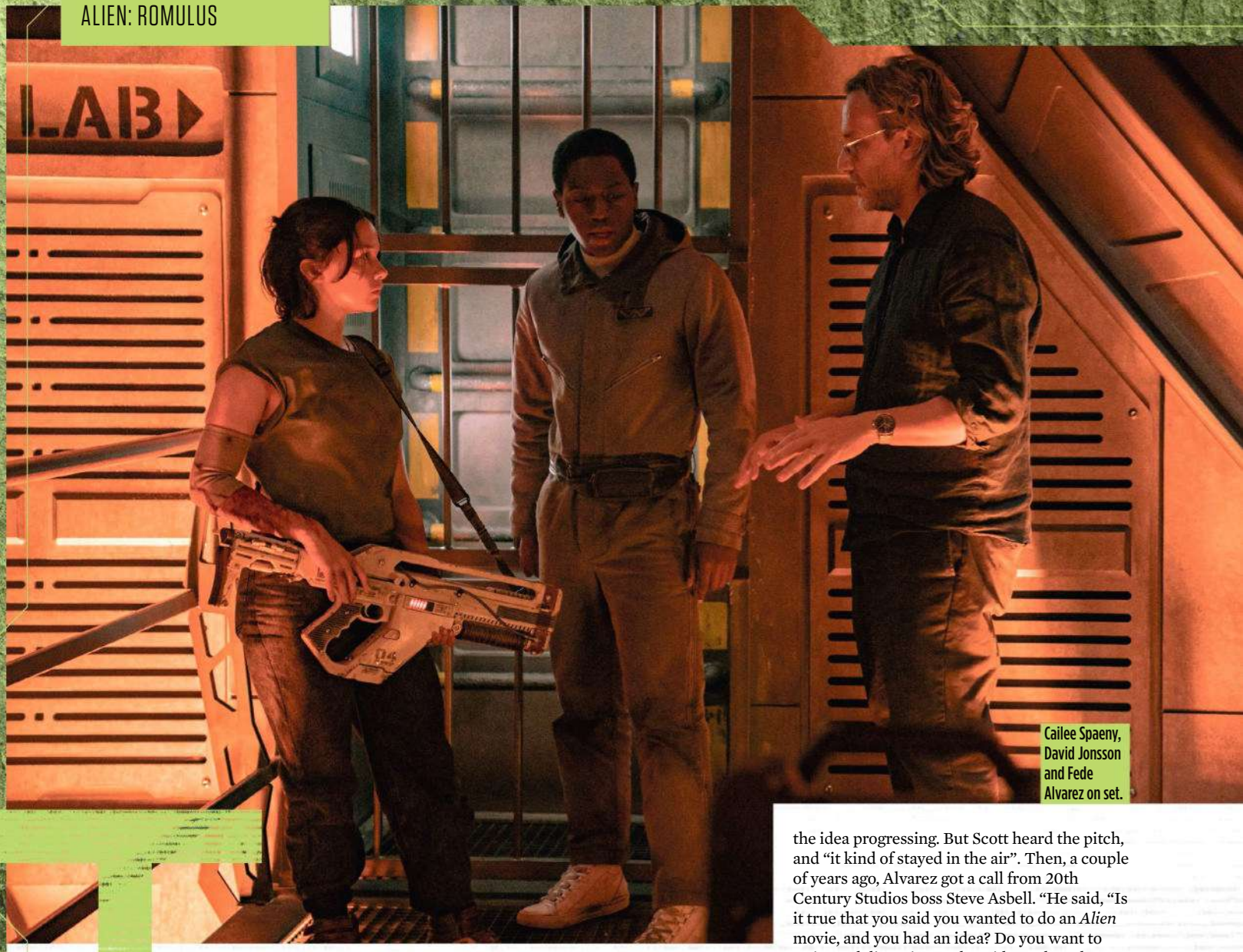


ALIEN: ROMULUS

THE *ALIEN* FRANCHISE IS GETTING AN INJECTION OF YOUTHFUL VIM WITH ALIEN: ROMULUS. WE SPEAK TO FEDE ALVAREZ AND STARS CAILEE SPAENY AND DAVID JONSSON ABOUT A FILM THE DIRECTOR DESCRIBES AS "A PUNCH IN THE FACE THAT YOU CANNOT IGNORE" WORDS: **IAN BERRIMAN**



Cailee Spaeny, David Jonsson and Fede Alvarez on set.

IF ANY FILMMAKER IS LIVING their best life right now, it's surely Fede Alvarez, whose directing career has taken a path he couldn't have dreamed of back when he was shooting lo-fi shorts on a shoestring in Montevideo.

A decade on from reviving one beloved horror franchise with *Evil Dead*, he's now been given a crack at another, awakening the *Alien* franchise from another of its periodic slumbers in cryo-stasis – an opportunity he describes as a privilege. "It's a world of ideas that I love so much," Alvarez tells *SFX*. "To be able to go and play in that universe, it's just totally once in a lifetime."

The notion was first floated after Alvarez finished work on *Don't Breathe*, his 2016 film about three burglars who bite off more than they can chew when they break into the home of a blind Gulf War veteran. "[Producer] Tom Moran asked me what I would do if I could do anything," Alvarez recalls. "And I said with no hesitation, 'I would do *Alien*.'" This led to a meeting with Michael Schaefer, who was then president of Ridley Scott's production company Scott Free.

"I pitched them what is still very true to where this movie is today, just as a pure fan," Alvarez explains. "Mostly the idea of taking it back to its horror roots: the beautiful simplicity of that, and the steps that you put the audience through when you tell that sort of story.

"Not that *Prometheus* and *Covenant* didn't have horror in them – they had horror elements. But in a very strict screenwriting structure, from that standpoint, they're not horror movies. And I thought what I would want to see is the simplicity of going back to the beginning of what this franchise is."

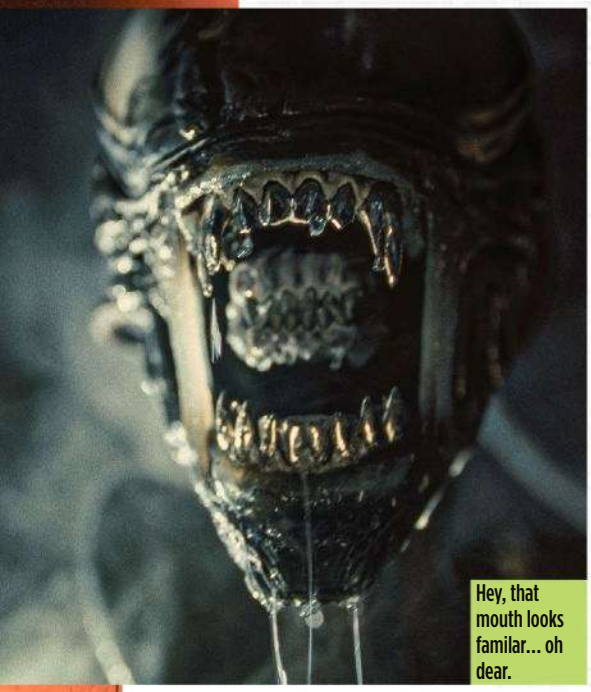
With Scott Free occupied on *Alien: Covenant* at the time, there was no immediate prospect of the idea progressing. But Scott heard the pitch, and "it kind of stayed in the air". Then, a couple of years ago, Alvarez got a call from 20th Century Studios boss Steve Asbell. "He said, "Is it true that you said you wanted to do an *Alien* movie, and you had an idea? Do you want to write and direct it?' And I said, 'Fuck yeah!'"

> **"They're living on a mining colony, there are no resources left, there is no future there"**

The director nutshells the storyline he came up with: "There's a bunch of young kids from this colony. They go into this station to try to get something that will be their ticket to escape to a better life. And things go really wrong for them..."

The derelict space station, which is dragged into the orbit of a gloomy, rainswept colony world called Jackson's Star, is named Renaissance. And that group of scavengers comprises six characters. Cailee Spaeny (who played aspiring photographer Jessie in *Civil War*) is Rain. David Jonsson plays Andy. The line-up is completed by Tyler (Archie Renaux), Kay (Isabela Merced), Bjorn (Spike Fearn), and Navarro (Aileen Wu) – a character we'd advise against getting too attached to...

The age of the leads is something that immediately leaps out. All six were in their twenties when principal photography commenced at Budapest's Origo Studios, with David Jonsson, at the ripe old age of 28, practically the veteran. "He is *completely* the old man," laughs Spaeny, a whole four years his junior, when *SFX* mentions this to her. "And we



Hey, that mouth looks familar... oh dear.

Director Fede Alvarez eyes up a facehugger.

definitely let him know that when we were filming the movie."

What lay behind this was a deleted scene from *Aliens* (reinstated for the Director's Cut), featuring a little boy riding a tricycle through the walkways of its "shake 'n' bake" colony, accompanied by a bunch of pals. "They're giggling and running around, and you go, 'Oh boy, this has got to be bad for those kids!'" Alvarez wryly observes.

"I mean, those kids are dead, probably, by the time the story starts. I remember watching that, and then a couple of scenes later you find out more about the colony, where there's not going to be an atmosphere for another 50 years. I thought, 'Oh boy, what a harsh reality for kids to grow up in. By the time they're teenagers, they're going to realise that there's no future for them there.'"

This chimed with the Uruguayan director, given his upbringing. "I tend to gravitate towards characters like that in my movies, having been born in a small country in Latin America where usually that was my feeling growing up. I think it's a universal feeling: this craving for something more, and believing there's more beyond your small town. You've seen that in *Star Wars*: Luke Skywalker's a farmer who wants to get the fuck out of there! There's something about it that felt different for the universe of *Alien*, but also felt like it belonged, because it was inspired by a scene I saw in *Aliens*."

Besides that, after 45 years of this franchise we've probably seen quite enough grizzled old-timers. "It felt like lately it was always really hard for these movies to come up with new thirtysomething truck drivers, y'know?" Alvarez says. "So I didn't want to try to do that again, because it's been done so successfully. Then it was like, 'Okay, where can we go that it feels like you haven't seen this before?'

"We wanted to bring it back to the same blue collar trucker, grounded character storyline as the first film, but this time it's farmers and miners, and they're younger," explains Spaeny. "They're living on a mining colony, there are no resources left, there is no future there, the system is not looking out for them, and there's no way out. So it's 'Fuck this!' Can we put our heads together and make a plan?"

For the actor, raised in Missouri, it was a world she recognised. "I'm from middle America – I come from a family of farmers. So it was like, 'Let's take it back to the blue collar roots? Got it.' I know what that looks like. I know what she looks like. I know how she acts."

Rain rains down hot death on a 'morph.

ALL ROADS LEAD TO ROME

Digging into the film's title proves to be productive when it comes to unpacking its broader themes. What could it refer to? No, *not* the home planet of *Star Trek*'s Romulans... although you can draw a line from both to the founding myth of the Roman Empire. Fathered by the war god Mars, twin brothers Romulus →

OLD FAITHFUL

Fede Alvarez on staying true to Giger's vision

When it came to *Romulus*' creature design, though there are some "slight evolutions", Alvarez's north star was to avoid "change for the sake of it", or "making it about myself".

"Whatever change there is – facehuggers have a slightly different skin, things like that – they're all justified in our story," he explains. "When thinking how the xeno is going to look, I wasn't going to go, 'How does *Fede's* xeno look?" Who gives a shit? I think people want to see the original xenomorph.

"I do love the biomechanical aspect of it that some filmmakers ditched, because you don't understand how he has a pipe on his head that looks like an engine. That shit is terrifying.

"Once he's a creature and he's all organic, like it became by *Alien: Resurrection*, it's like, 'Well, it's a creature. I understand it.' What's scary is when you don't understand. So with stuff like that I really tried to be as purist as I could, and go back to the creatures of the first film."

Alvarez was also keen for the choreography of the creature to be "more classy". "I prefer the more slow presence of the xenomorph like the original movie, instead of the jumpy ninja shit that happened in later movies. So it's more like a Nosferatu presence than just some guy that is angry and screaming all the time, y'know?"

MAXIMUM FILM / ALAMY

"Okay, I'll try Facial Expression 3 for this shot."

SCARED ACT

Notepads out, budding thespians: Cailee Spaeny has a masterclass in how to convey terror

Given how long principal photography takes on a movie like *Alien: Romulus*, we wonder what's more exhausting for one of the cast: all the running around, or having to hype yourself into a convincingly terrified state for days on end? Can you just turn that on and off?

"I try to," Spaeny laughs, "but honestly, when you shoot a movie like this for months and you're doing so many horror beats, you do run out of ways to be horrified! The whole time I was making the movie, the second I got home I either had a sci-fi or a horror film playing in the background the whole time. Usually horror.

"So whether that was having *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* on, or *The Blair Witch Project*, or *Near Dark*. Because you do sort of run out of ideas. You're like, 'I don't know how to be horrified again today in an interesting way. I've got, like, three facial expressions and you've seen all of them about 100 times now!'

"Six months is a long time to film the movie and to stay in it. First month, first two months you've got your eye on the prize. Then things start getting a little weird when you're on month four and five," – Spaeny's voice becomes increasingly weary – "and you're filming in the darkness every day, and there's blood everywhere, and you're tired, and things just move a little slower. So I was always trying to find inspiration in other films as well."

Are there any physical shortcuts you can use to get into the right headspace – any actors' tricks? Or do you have to resort to getting Fede Alvarez to hide in cupboards and jump out at you? "Oh my *god*, we would do the dumbest shit to try to get ourselves pumped up," she laughs. "All the cast members had their own different way. Archie [Renaux] would run in place as fast as possible, right before 'Action'. Some people would be doing laps. Some people would be holding their breath right before 'Action.'"

Spaeny simulates some laboured breathing. "You can't do that, because it looks fake and stupid. So you have to be *that* actor. Then the whole crew is rolling their eyes like, 'Fucking just *act scared*', and you're doing jumping jacks and shit. But we were all in it together – all looking like idiots together. You're in an *Alien* movie, you better go there!"

So no jumping out of cupboards, then. Shame. "But also Fede was great, because he would have surprises, and he'd throw things in that would catch us off guard. I remember one time where it was a very important homage-y type moment – a pure horror moment – and he let the camera roll and made me stay in that state for about 10 minutes. I was, like, waiting for the cut because it was meant to be a minute, and it just *kept going*! But it worked, y'know?"

Cailee Spaeny and Alvarez play a control deck duet.

and Remus were ordered drowned by the king, and placed on the river Tiber in a basket. On washing ashore, the two survived after being suckled by a she-wolf, with Romulus later going on to build Rome on the very site.

On the most prosaic level, there's a simple explanation: the Renaissance station is divided into two sections, one called Romulus, the other Remus. "Weyland-Yutani tends to have this inclination towards Roman mythology," Alvarez notes. "Some of their planets are named after Roman rivers and so on. So there's this constant connection between the company and the Roman Empire."

Beyond that, there's a connection to whatever nefarious project was being conducted on-board, which seems to have involved keeping multiple facehuggers in storage. "It also has to do with the big picture of what Weyland-Yutani's doing," the director says, "and humans stealing the gift of a stronger species – breastfeeding from the she-wolf." Finally, the title relates to a major theme at a character level. "The six main characters are,

Romulus' Aliens are back to being biomechs.

in a way, three pairs of different aspects of siblinghood," Alvarez explains. "Related by blood. Related just by growing up together in the same household and considering someone your brother.

"And different aspects, as well, of how to do that: done right, done wrong. People honouring the concept of being someone's brother or sister, and people neglecting that. Those siblinghoods are put to the test when things get really bad." Quite how badly wrong could prove interesting, given that, as Alvarez notes, "Romulus and Remus is a siblinghood that did *not* go well, because Romulus killed Remus!"

The most fascinating of those pairings is Rain and Andy – who may be the *Alien* franchise's sixth android character, but clearly stands apart from any we've seen before. "She's got a brother to take care of and look out for," Spaeny explains, "Then the spin on it is that he's a synthetic. So we take the synthetic storyline, and instead of Ripley being very cautious and sceptical of synthetics, we flip it on its head. This is actually my family member who I'm trying to fight for. It's not just survival to take care of myself, it's me and my brother, who is a synthetic."

> **"It has an equal dose of DNA of both Alien and Aliens, mixed in different ways"**

Isabela Merced as Kay: don't go in there! Oh, too late.

Alvarez identifies this relationship as the heart of the movie. "Subtract all the Aliens, subtract all the horror, and there's still a story you'll want to see until the end of how that relationship unfolds. Which is quite new for the franchise. As much as we love the characters from the first movie, there are no meaningful relationships, really. There's no time for that, a lot of times, in these movies. But we figured out a way to tell a compelling horror action thriller and still get a good story there, I think."

The events of *Romulus* take place "roughly 20 years after the first film", during the 57-year gap between *Alien* and *Aliens*. And by the sound of it, tonally speaking, it exists at a midpoint between them. "It's like those two movies had a child," Alvarez says. "It has an equal dose of DNA of both, mixed in different ways. The pace of it, the way it starts, is more similar to the first film. Then it gradually morphs into a world that seems to be more *Aliens*... just to take you back home again for the last few minutes, which are some of the most intense. The last 15 minutes go back to being very, very *Alien*."

"It was really us trying to see if we could marry the two together," Spaeny says. "That was always the challenge: where do we fall right in the middle; how do we do that? And it really depends day to day, because you're having the moments of dialogue at the beginning of the film, you're really trying to ground it, and it feels more *Alien*.

"Then you're in the swing of things, and I'm doing a shot with the gun, going through the ship and you're like, 'This is a full *Aliens* moment". And you just have to turn on the leaf blowers and lean into it!"

BACK TO BASICS

When it came to the film's cinematography, Scott's 1979 original was the go-to reference, and Alvarez was rigorous in trying to ensure maximum fidelity to it. When we speak to the director he's in the middle of fine-tuning the colour-grading, and reveals that "We have a scan of the original 35mm print of *Alien*, and we put it on the screen side by side with ours.

"Obviously that would do nothing if we didn't do our job on the day," he adds, noting that they have to light the set in an appropriate way first. "Visually, half of the work is that: just making sure that it looks like you're in that universe."

Going even further back in the process, Alvarez and production designer Naaman Marshall went to considerable lengths to ensure that the sets looked right, rifling

Continued on page 30...

HE AIN'T AI, HE'S MY BROTHER

DAVID JONSSON PLAYS THE *ALIEN* FRANCHISE'S LATEST ANDROID – THE APPROPRIATELY NAMED ANDY

PHOTOGRAPHER: **DAVID REISS** // STYLIST: **DAVID NOLAN** // GROOMER: **COURTNEY-REECE SCOTT**

This film has a very young cast – at 28 you were actually the oldest! How did it feel to be the veteran on set?

I don't know about that! I'd definitely say I'm the indie boy on set. This is my first studio film, and it was quite a big deal. But yeah, you're right. It's so funny, isn't it, because this *Alien* franchise is so vast, with so many great films, but it's never come from this perspective, which is a group of young people. So it definitely feels like a first for the franchise.

Does that give the film a different energy?

Absolutely. But one thing I will say is: there is something, at first glance, that one might take away from it, which is that it's just a bunch of young kids in space. And that really isn't what this is at all. If anything it adds to it, because we've got so much more that we can find, and more we're in search of. A lot of it is coming from the fact that we're trying to find a new planet, find something that's better, and it's because we've got so much life ahead of us. Obviously it's wonderful that we're a young cast, and the excitement is so there for us. But it's definitely not a gimmick. It's not a trope.

It's not like, say, watching a slasher movie about a bunch of high school kids?

No, exactly. And why I'd say it isn't is because Fede and the team, and our wonderful writer Rodo [Sayagues], really carved out these relationships. It's all relationship-based. It's not just like: because you're young, every relationship is always like a surface wound. My relationship with Rain is *bone deep*, which means that if anything happens with it, it hurts all the more. I think they did a really good job of carving out these relationships, and making it feel real. It feels almost like a family drama. In space. With Aliens!

Cailee's character, Rain, views Andy as a brother. How did that dynamic come about in the first place? It's not something we've seen before.

Yeah, we've had so many amazing synthetics, but we've never had this kind of relationship. Andy was basically given to Rain by her father before he passed away, as something to watch over her. Inevitably that relationship became that of a brother and sister. I think there's something deeper there – like, we don't have to *be* flesh and blood to be flesh and blood, if you know what I mean. Any stepbrother and stepsister relationship is testament to that. Me and Cailee really worked to find what that relationship was.

Did you find it useful to look at the android performances in previous films?

Normally I say I don't want to have that influence – not because I'm trying to be cool, but more because I intimidate myself. These are some really wonderful actors, who have done wonderful jobs of being synthetics and pushing that story forward. To be next to those people – Michael Fassbender, Winona Ryder, Ian Holm – it's crazy. Nonetheless, I think that what was written here on the page, and what attracted me to the script, was that this is very, very new. This is a new kind of synthetic. Andy is a first, I would definitely say.

What do you think will surprise people about *Romulus*?

Honestly, and I'm not being opaque here, *everything*, really. And I'm not just saying that because I'm in it! I think it really is something that, on paper, shouldn't be made, and it just works brilliantly. Fede has really breathed new life into what this is, and that breath has come from the wonderful work that he's done on *Don't Breathe* and *Evil Dead*, those very strange, incredibly scary tense dramas – he's put all of that into this film. I really think that there's something fresh and invigorated. Like you said, we're quite a young cast, but we really delve right into the drama of it. There's nothing "surface" about this.

Ridley Scott is an executive producer on the film. Did you get the chance to talk to him?

No, actually, but he did send me and Cailee notes. Which was really crazy, right? Because obviously *it's Ridley Scott*, and that first *Alien*.... well, those first two *Alien* films, you couldn't make me choose between them... they live in cinematic history. I was like, "Oh my gosh, Ridley Scott sent me a note!" And I looked at it and it was basically just like, "Don't mess it up."

No pressure!

Exactly! Which was exciting, anticlimactic, and also gave me a little bit of pressure. I think there were other things in the note as well, very much like, "You're the only person who can do this, and I have every faith in you." But it was definitely like, "Don't mess it up!"

Andy (David Jonsson): he's your friend. Honestly.

The xenos are notorious for not using breath mints.

...Continued from page 27

through the archives to draw on conceptual artist Ron Cobb's work. "We dug out a lot of concept art that was done for those movies that wasn't even used, and figured out a way to be inspired by that and put it in this movie."

Such meticulousness even extended to the score. "We were in Abbey Road last week, recording on the same stage, exactly 38 years after James Horner was there recording the soundtrack for *Aliens*," Alvarez reveals. "Even to that extent, we wanted to make sure that the score is recorded in the same room, because with the level of reverb they have, those room sounds, it will make it sound closer to *Aliens*.

"So we've been through this fascinating and magical rabbit hole of technology and techniques to make sure we could reproduce as closely as possible the technical aspects of those films. You'll see, when you see it on the big screen, that it's really hard to believe that it was shot last year."

Alvarez's first exposure to the *Alien* franchise came not in a cinema, but through watching a VHS which went behind-the-scenes to show how movie effects – including those of *Aliens* – are made. So it makes perfect sense that a central plank of his approach was an emphasis on physical effects, be it animatronics, puppetry or a performer in a suit. "I don't get any joy out of someone else at a computer somewhere in the world creating the shot," he says. "I get the joy out of seeing it happen in front of us. So everything that was possible to do practically, we did."

And Alvarez didn't just hire *some* practical effects guys – he hired *the* practical effects guys. "The same team that built the Queen on *Aliens* when they were in their twenties came back for this, and they built the xenomorph – Shane Mahan, who worked on *Aliens* with Stan Winston. We had Alec Gillis, who also worked on all these movies [from *Aliens* to *Aliens vs Predator: Requiem*] do the chestburster and puppeteer it with all his team. Then Wētā Workshop worked on all the facehuggers."

Alvarez got a particular buzz from seeing Gillis and Mahan – whose companies have been competitors for decades – reunited for the first time since *Aliens*, with Mahan mucking in on the chestburster when an extra pair of hands was called for.

They drew on old-school model work too – albeit given a 2024 twist for certain sequences. "We had Ian Hunter, who is this legend of modelmakers – he built Mars for *Total Recall* when he was a kid – build the spaceships for us. There's a combination of techniques: we build it by hand, then we scan them, and then we have ILM and Wētā for the digital effects, and they start from assets that were built and painted by hand.

"Just like when you scan a person's face and put it in a computer, it's based on something

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Now you know the significance of *Romulus*, here's some more *Alien* references unpacked

NOSTROMO The commercial vessel in *Alien* took its name from a Joseph Conrad novel, in which it's the nickname of a docker – nostromo being the Italian word for a boatswain.

ACHERON Home to the doomed colony in *Aliens*, this exomoon shares its moniker with the Greek river along which (in some mythological accounts) ferryman Charon rows the dead to the underworld.

USS SULACO The Colonial Marines' ship is named after the fictional port that's the principal setting of *Nostromo*. Clearly someone at Weyland-Yutani HQ was a Conrad fan.

USM AURIGA *Alien: Resurrection*'s medical research vessel shares its name with a constellation; "Auriga" is Latin for a charioteer.

PROMETHEUS The Titan who, in Greek mythology, defied the gods by stealing fire from Olympus and giving it to humanity. But you knew that, right?

Modelmaker Ian Hunter (centre) on set.

real, instead of the way people tend to do it, which is to build an asset in the computer because you can do whatever. For us it was really about embracing the limitations of those techniques that makes them more real."

Thanks to an effects legend who, amongst other things, helped bring *RoboCop*'s ED-209 to bullet-spraying life, *Romulus* is even part of a lineage stretching back through Ray Harryhausen's *Sinbad* movies to Willis O'Brien's work on *King Kong*. "There's a sequence with a small creature where I felt doing stop-motion was a better idea, and we brought in Phil Tippett and his team to work on that. So we really went above and beyond. And those things *are in the movie*," he emphasises. "Because I've read too many times how directors have the desire to do it with the old techniques. Then they look at it on screen, it doesn't look so good, and it gets painted over with CG.

Tyler (Archie Renaux) teaches Rain about guns.

> **"When you see it on the big screen, it's really hard to believe that it was shot last year"**

"That's not what happened to us. That's why I felt like I needed to go back to all those artists that did it before: to make sure we nailed it, and did it in a way that was not going to be replaced by CG."

The cast certainly felt the benefit of Alvarez's old-school approach, with its total absence of greenscreens and sets that, as the director puts it, "you could get lost inside". Spaeny fondly recalls her first day shooting in a spaceship set.

"We hit turbulence, and the whole thing actually *shook*. It felt like we were at Disneyland! And it was all real, we were getting thrown around. The whole crew was way down below us, and we were up on this giant gimbal getting shaken. We were just like, 'This is our job?!'

"And you had these guys who'd been working with these creatures for years and years and years – this is their baby. They were kids working on *Aliens*, and they'd tell you stories: 'I remember when Sigourney was dah-dah-dah...' So you felt that craftsmanship. There's no way to have those people there and not feel like you're making a true love letter to *Alien*."

Another great thing about practical effects is that they're just a *laugh*, aren't they? When you're trying to act against, say, a bunch of guys rod-puppeting a drooling Alien head, it must cause the odd crack-up.

"There were a *lot* of giggles," Spaeny confirms. "Fede would be so mad if I said that, but it's true. We were borderline peeing our pants, because you do just have a guy going, 'One, two, three... RAARGGGH!'"

It seems to have acted as a reminder of why she got into the business of show in the first place. "To me, it's beautiful," she adds, "because when you think about us as kids, when we thought about making movies, it doesn't get purer than this guy back in the [effects] shop making some goo-filled creature and going, 'Let's make a film.'

"These legends are the reason why we have all these monster films – they've brought them to life," Spaeny continues. "It feels a bit like a dying art. So to get to bring it back in the age of AI, and everything being warped and changed; to have this guy right there, squeezing a last bit of goo onto a creature right before you call 'Action!'... That's movies! That's movies right there!

"We're all kids, right?" she laughs, grinning at the memory of all that glorious make-believe. "We're this weird circus of strange people making monster films. And truly, that is the core of where I came in with making this movie: just love for this genre and this franchise."

Alien: Romulus is in cinemas from 16 August.

TERROR TALES

READ AN *ALIEN* NOVEL AND ONLY YOU CAN HEAR YOURSELF SCREAM! WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

WHILE IT CAN BE difficult to recreate the intense terror of *Alien* in prose form, without the benefit of visuals, authors have different techniques.

Alien: Uncivil War's Brendan Deneen, *Aliens: Bishop*'s TR Napper, and Philippa Ballantine – who co-wrote *Alien: Inferno's Fall* and the upcoming *Alien: Seventh Circle* with Clara Čarija – can go where movies cannot by really getting inside the heads of their petrified protagonists.

"It's hard to be scary in a novel," says Deneen. "So I really focused more on the relationships of the characters and the gore, which was fun to write because one of the things about *Alien* and *Aliens* is the body horror of it, as you've got the chestburster and the cocoons. There are some challenges when writing these creatures, and the biggest one is that you can't really capture the scariness of the alien itself, which was Ridley Scott really using all of his craft as a filmmaker. *Aliens* has got a couple of scary moments but it's not really about the scares. My book is definitely a melding of those first two films and is somewhere between them in terms of scope."

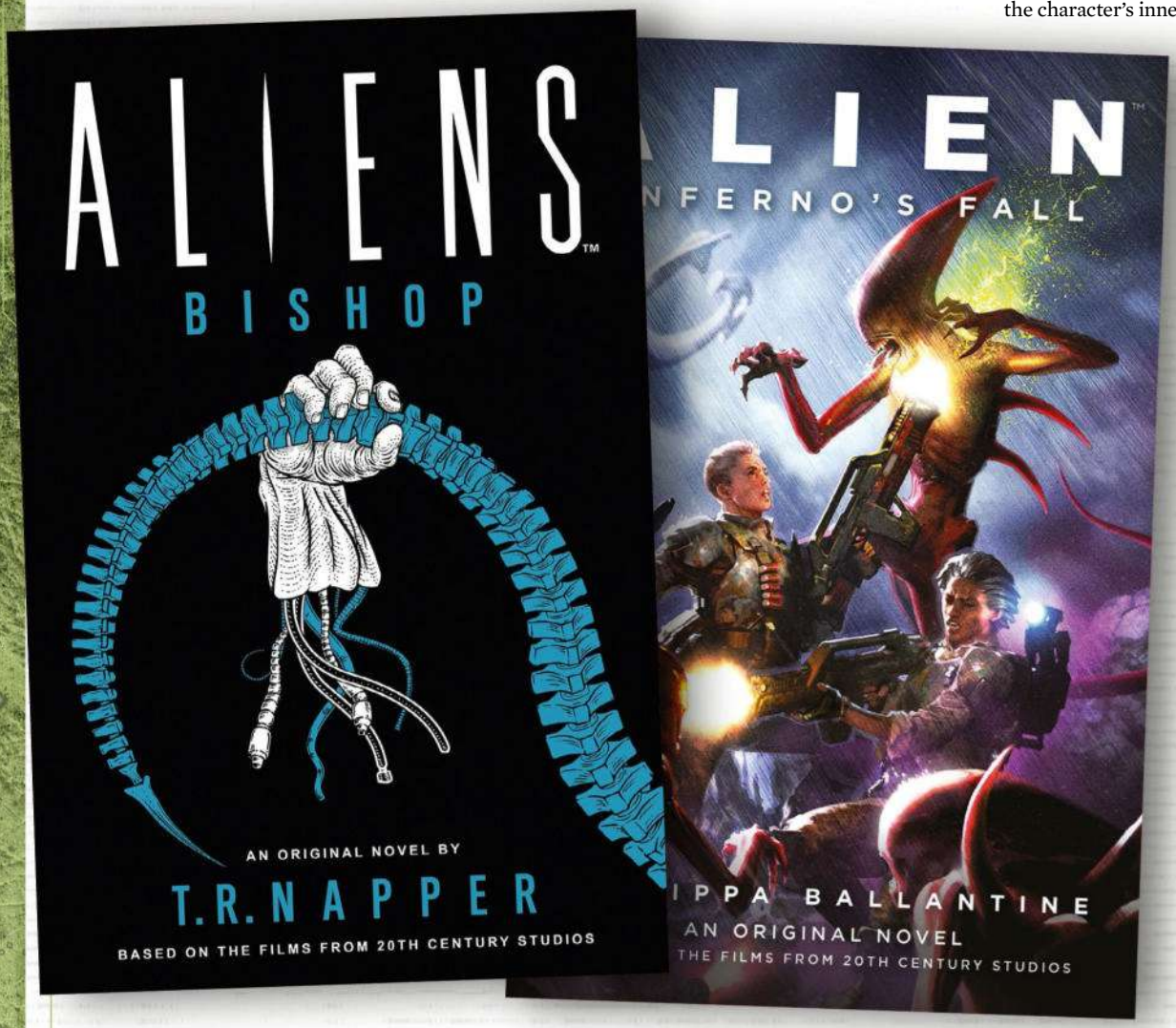
"The advantages of prose are those of interiority," continues Napper. "We can convey what a character is thinking and feeling in a way that cannot be done on screen. Prose is an empathetic art form – we can put ourselves in the shoes of the characters, feel the thumping of their hearts during battle, and wince at the biting acid touch of alien blood on their skin."

Ballantine concurs. "As much wonder as the movies engender, books bring a way to access the character's inner life. I would have loved to have heard what Ripley was thinking when she was facing off against her first xenomorph."

In the recently released *Uncivil War*, Deenen goes even further, writing a sequence from the perspective of the xenomorphs themselves.

"My editor Daquan Cadogan asked me to do one scene from their point of view, which I initially resisted," he says. "But I'm glad that he pushed me because it was fun to do, and it works because it almost paints them as innocent in a weird way. They're like sharks, as they're not trying to be evil. They're like the ultimate survivors, and in my novel they don't mean to get caught up in the middle of this war that's emerging."

Uncivil War was originally conceived as a fan fiction alternative to *Alien 3*, but at Titan Books' behest was reworked to occur shortly after fourth film *Alien Resurrection*, with all-new characters replacing Ripley, Hicks and Newt.



“They’re like sharks, as they’re not trying to be evil. They’re like the ultimate survivors”

Deneen also drew on his own personal experience for the story of Chris Temple, a former soldier who escapes a ruined Earth with his children only to crash-land on a remote outpost world, which is embroiled in an internecine conflict – and that’s before the xenomorphs make their presence felt. “It’s about a dad and his two daughters, which is what I have,” says Deneen, who also establishes a unique bond between Temple and his faithful synth, Alicia.

“Originally, the character was going to be Bishop but then I made her like a nanny,” he continues. “Then I was like, ‘What if she is so damaged in the crash that she falls in love with Chris and he realises he loves her too?’ It’s a little bit more subtle than that, but I love this idea of android love.”

SYNTH CITY

While he doesn’t appear in *Uncivil War*, Lance Henriksen’s synthetic is the focus of TR Napper’s *Bishop*, a direct sequel to both *Alien* and *Aliens*. Opening a few weeks after the events of *Alien 3*, it sees scientist Michael Bishop restoring the critically damaged droid to life in an attempt to obtain some invaluable xenomorph data from his memories.

“Normally I write cyberpunk, in a world more akin to *Blade Runner*,” says Napper. “Ridley Scott has said he always imagined the crew of the Nostromo, when they returned to Earth, ending up in a city much like the Los Angeles depicted in *Blade Runner*. It’s for this reason, I suspect, that people who have read both *Bishop* and my original fiction tell me that the Earth I depict in my stories is the Earth as they imagined it in the *Alien* universe.”

Meanwhile, *Inferno’s Fall* and *Seventh Circle* centre on Colonel Zula Hendricks, who debuted in the 2016 Dark Horse Comics series *Aliens: Defiance*. “*Seventh Circle* is a continuation of *Inferno’s Fall*, and this time we travel along with Zula and her force of Jackals, through the broken memory of her synthetic daughter Mae,” explains Ballantine.

“We also bring back many characters from our first book, and there’s one familiar synthetic face that makes an appearance. Apart from that, we’re examining some more corporate attempts to control the xenomorphs in some truly dark and twisted ways, so we’ll have to wait and see how that goes!”

Alien: Uncivil War, Aliens: Bishop and Alien: Inferno’s Fall are out now. Alien: Seventh Circle is out on 29 October.

HR Giger on set with the alien egg he designed.

JAWS IN SPACE

FORTY-FIVE YEARS ON FROM ITS ORIGINAL RELEASE, ALIEN CONTINUES TO TERRIFY. WE DISSECT WHAT ARGUABLY REMAINS THE MOST CHILLING INSTALMENT IN THE SAGA

WORDS: **OLIVER PFEIFFER**

THE SEVEN-STRONG CREW of the commercial mining spacecraft the Nostromo seal their fate after reluctantly responding to a mysterious distress signal on a hostile planet. Here, a face-hugging alien from a derelict ship impregnates and later kills executive officer Kane (John Hurt) after its offspring is birthed onboard. After being unleashed, the fearsome newborn with acid for blood proceeds to dispatch the remainder of the crew.

Ridley Scott's much more convoluted prequels have yet to reveal how the knowledge that led to this initial interception was acquired. However, the premise of the original *Alien* is perfect in its uncomplicated purity.

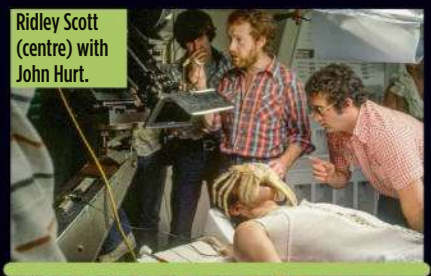
"It's an amazing script, very simple and beautifully written," agrees Roger Christian, the Oscar-winning art director behind *Alien* who carried across the worn, lived-in look he perfected for the Millennium Falcon as set decorator on *Star Wars*.

"Ridley wanted the ship like a space truck. He said, 'I want that look'. The Nostromo was already built when I came onboard, but it needed to be dressed. There was a snake-like structure that went over two stages. Ridley needed that to do all those amazing tracks of the interiors in the opening sequence to get that claustrophobia."

Indeed, part of the haunting beauty of *Alien* remains its progressive claustrophobia – the fully enclosed set was shot with a widescreen anamorphic lens and had its ceilings continuously lowered to make the vessel appear to get increasingly confined as events progress, and the titular alien becomes monstrously bigger.

"We decided to remove any windows to heighten that claustrophobia," continues Christian. "I think the world we created visually with that ship [made] the audience believe that we had gotten an old spacecraft. It was functional: the seats and switches worked on the bridge, and I pressed in bits of old coffee cups and things that I thought would be there on a long trip – you don't have pristine, clean buttons and things."

A ship this size needs a navigator. Enter Joan Lambert, played by Veronica Cartwright, who had initially auditioned for the lead role of warrant officer Ripley. "I haven't even read the script from Lambert's point of view [and] it bothered me that she was so weepy all the time, so I tried to make her not such a candy-ass!" she says. "But weirdly [she] was the audience; the way they were feeling, they wanted to get out of there too!" →



Ridley Scott (centre) with John Hurt.

Scott adjusts the set for the film's finale.

With Veronica Cartwright and Sigourney Weaver.

COLLECTION CHRISTOPHEL, TCD/PROD.DB / ALAMY

The chest-bursting scene surprised everyone...

Nothing could prepare the actors, let alone the characters, for Kane's horrific alien birth sequence – and Lambert experienced the full brunt of the bloody chestburster.

"I was told that I would get a little blood on me, and when I leaned forward to see what was going on, the blood-jet was pointed directly in my face!" Cartwright says. "I was covered, and that was the cut they ended up using, as that was the only take we ever did.

"The sequence worked out really well. They had built this false chest for John Hurt that was filled with kidneys and livers, and then they had big buckets of it sitting around. Everyone was wearing raincoats. Then there was this puppeteer underneath doing the monster stuff, so we actually saw [the alien] break through, turn around and look at us!"

HR'S DEPARTMENT

However, it was the full-sized manifestation of this seemingly indestructible threat that gave everyone onboard something to truly fear. As designed by Swiss artist HR Giger, the psychosexual biomechanical beauty of the iconic creature (based on the artist's 1976 painting *Necronom IV*) was a highly original creative touchstone.

The Facehugger model: ah, dinky!

To embody the strategically shrouded alien design, 6' 10" design student Bolaji Badejo was hired to fill a costume, after a chance encounter at a bar with the casting director, who noticed his incredibly slender frame and elongated limbs.

Giger would also design the alien egg, the Facehugger, Chestburster, the derelict alien spacecraft and the Space Jockey driving deck where a creature (revealed to be an "Engineer" in prequel *Prometheus*) is fused to the chair. He also created the unnamed alien planet, after production designer Michael Seymour built the artist a structure to enable him to sculpt it in miniature using bones.

"Giger was very involved in that world, and I was very reverent to his art, as it was amazing," continues Christian. "I got him a lot of modelling clay, and he was just very quiet and dedicated. He sculpted all the time, and when the stage was built, he would go in with airbrushes and sculpt and spray the paint."

Back on the Nostromo, the suffocating set was contributing to the actors' psychological sense of confinement. Ridley Scott's apparent preoccupation with the film's look intentionally alienated these actors, too – helping to create a realistically uneasy dynamic between these "space truckers". "Ridley wasn't giving the actors many instructions, as he wanted them to be a bit nervous and isolated, so Sigourney Weaver would always come to me," recalls Christian. "I was on set the entire time during the shoot, and she just got my trust. I always said, 'You look great – you're already looking like someone who could be in command of that ship; you've got that strength to you!'"

A physical altercation between the two female characters bled into reality. In a scene deleted from the theatrical release, but restored for the 2003 *Director's Cut*, Lambert slaps Ripley due to her earlier refusal to let them back onboard with the infected Kane.

"That was real. But every time I went to slap [Sigourney Weaver], she kept ducking, and Ridley said to me, 'Would you just get her this time!' So I went to hit her, and then I backhanded her, and she was not a happy camper!" recalls Cartwright.

"I think we'd all been in space too long. We were all a little aggravated with one another. After Dallas [Tom Skerritt] dies, Ripley becomes the captain, but she must earn that."

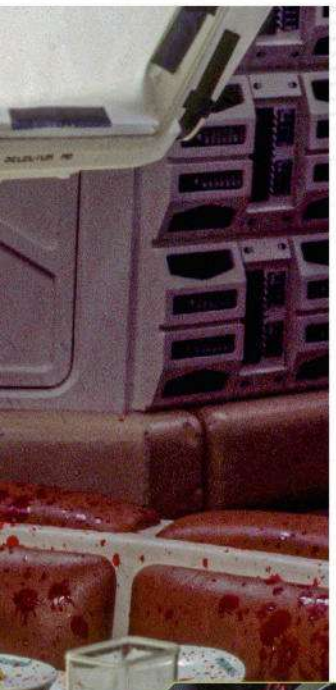
Ripley, Parker and Brett on the hunt.

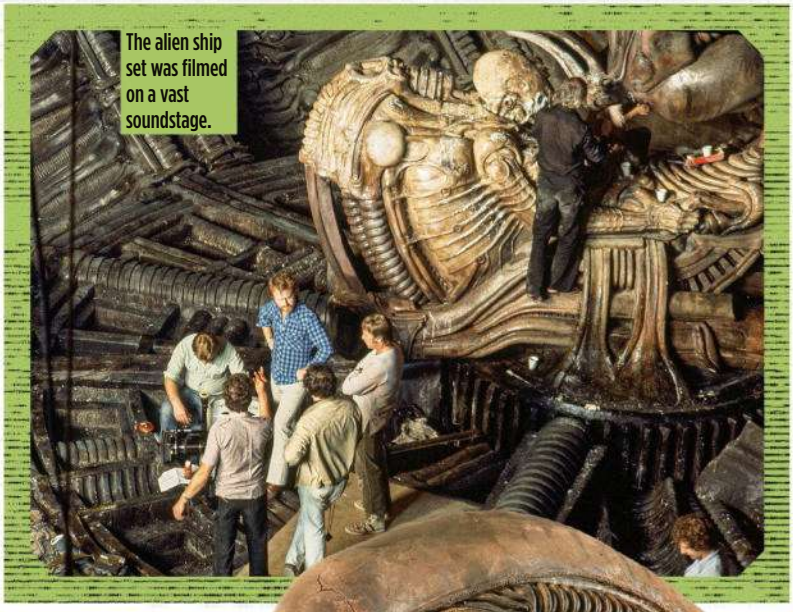
Yaphet Kotto as Parker with the alien.

Examining the "Space Jockey".

20TH CENTURY FOX/KOBAL/PROPSTORE.COM/SHUTTERSTOCK, COLLECTION CHRISTOPHEL/ALAMY, SUNSET BOULEVARD/CORBIS VIA GETTY

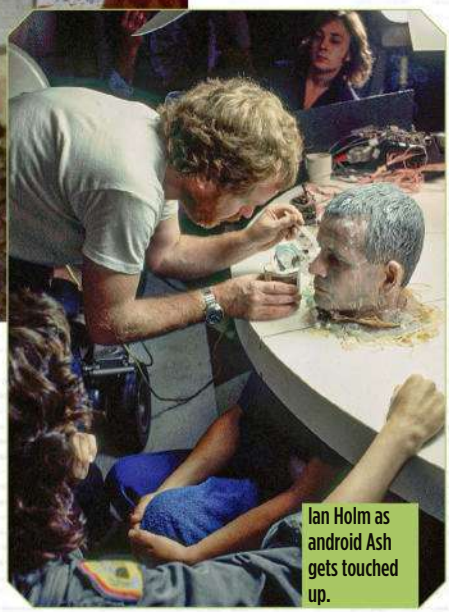
STOCK ART: SERGII ZHMURCHAK, HERHURRICANE, R.TSUBIN, TONGSUR, THE7DEW/GETTY





The alien ship set was filmed on a vast soundstage.

The alien's head houses a deadly tongue.



Ian Holm as android Ash gets touched up.

> **"I went to hit her, and then I backhanded her, and she was not a happy camper"**

There was initially some resistance towards casting the young, unknown Weaver. Scott was adamant, however, and with the help of Roger Christian, convinced the studio that they had found the perfect actor to portray the pivotal role of Ripley.

"Ridley had to screen-test Weaver because [20th Century] Fox wanted a star, and he said, 'No, I've found the actor. She's so good, and I need her,'" recalls Christian. "So they said, 'Alright, we'll screen-test her and take a look'. Ridley wisely didn't want to do the usual screen test. He said, 'Can you build me a piece of the Nostromo corridor, and I'll put her into action?' I quickly built it for him using a lot of aircraft scrap components, and it's in that screen test that you witness the beginnings of *Alien*."

Alien remains an intelligent, deeply atmospheric, unsettling horror. The key to its power is its slow, suspenseful build-up. This stillness is ruptured by the facehugger attack on Kane, then again when he gives bloody birth. From this point, *Alien* turns into a relentless survival thriller. While it was followed by James Cameron's high-octane action-thriller *Aliens* and various other sequels, spin-offs and prequels, it's the menacing, beautifully shot original that arguably still stands strongest.

Alexandre O Philippe's 2019 documentary *Memory: The Origins Of Alien* acknowledges the important contribution of original writer Dan O'Bannon, who's been somewhat overshadowed by subsequent writers (David Giler and Walter Hill made numerous revisions) and the visualists Scott and Giger. It also argues that *Alien* sprouted from a deeper collective psychology, harking back to the mythology of the Greek Furies via the work of painter Francis Bacon. His painting *Three Studies For Figures At The Base Of A Crucifixion* was an influence on the Chestburster design.

Whatever you think of such an argument, there's no disputing that *Alien* taps into our primal fears far more profoundly than its science fiction trappings may initially suggest. In space, no one can hear you dream...

Alien is available on 4K, Blu-ray and Disney+.

ALIEN INFLUENCES

We look at the films that arguably shaped Ridley Scott's original 1979 classic

It! The Terror From Beyond Space (1958)

Alien owes a clear debt to the creature feature plot of this independent B-movie science fiction horror, where a colossal, seemingly undefeatable stowaway creature from Mars runs rampant on a spacecraft, hunting the crew one by one.

Planet Of The Vampires (1965)

"I stole the giant skeleton from *Planet Of The Vampires*," Dan O'Bannon admitted. Much of *Alien*'s imagery can arguably be traced back to this sci-fi shocker, including a sequence where astronauts explore a derelict ship.

Queen Of Blood (1966)

This Roger Corman production similarly concerns astronauts intercepting a distress signal and venturing into a downed alien vessel. There the crew finds a dead creature in a chair, and brings back a living one which later attacks them.

Dark Star (1974)

John Carpenter's debut saw a crew slowly going insane destroying unstable planets. With audiences not responding to its humour, co-writer and star Dan O'Bannon concluded "If I can't make them laugh, maybe I can make them scream."

VOGUE PICTURES, INC., AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL PICTURES, CINEMA WEST PRODUCTIONS, JACK H HARRIS ENTERPRISES

AVENGING THE ALIEN

WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

THE XENOMORPHS MEET EARTH'S MIGHTIEST HEROES IN ALIENS VS AVENGERS

FROM BATMAN TO JUDGE Dredd, the xenomorphs encountered a wide range of comics characters during the three decades *Alien* was published by Dark Horse.

Shifting to Marvel in 2021, the terrifying space creatures have yet to cross paths with any of the House of Ideas' superheroes, although their Fox stablemates the Yautja starred in last year's *Predator Vs Wolverine* and will shortly appear in *Predator Vs Black Panther*. But now they're set to face off against Earth's Mightiest Heroes in writer Jonathan Hickman and artist Esad Ribić's upcoming *Aliens Vs Avengers*.

"The crossover aspect is probably the most fun part of editing these franchises, because who doesn't get excited to see Predator take on Wolverine or the Avengers take on Aliens?" says editor Sarah Brunstad. "It really doesn't get any better in pop culture. They're both such powerful protagonists, and pitting them against Marvel heroes can cut through the cynicism and fatigue we can sometimes get with superheroes as it feels like the story has new, different stakes. Something could happen that you've never seen before, and that's exhilarating for all of us."

"What makes this different is that at their core the Avengers are primarily based on stakes and scale," adds Hickman. "So when you combine that with all the characters and concepts found in the *Alien* universe, it takes the idea of the universe's perfect killing machine to a logical place, which is what the story's about – the survival of everything."

Set in an alternate future timeline, the four-parter features older, grittier versions of the Avengers. Hickman has also integrated several aspects of the *Alien* backstory, such as the home of the Engineers, into the Marvel Universe. "We've taken some liberties in wrapping Avengers lore inside the super-continuity, which is great fun," says Hickman, who also drew on Ridley Scott's original *Alien* and James Cameron's sequel. "I'm very happy to say that my favourite bits of the story are when we really embrace what made the first two movies tick, so there really is a creeping sense of dread throughout the story."

> **"We've taken some liberties in wrapping Avengers lore inside the super-continuity"**

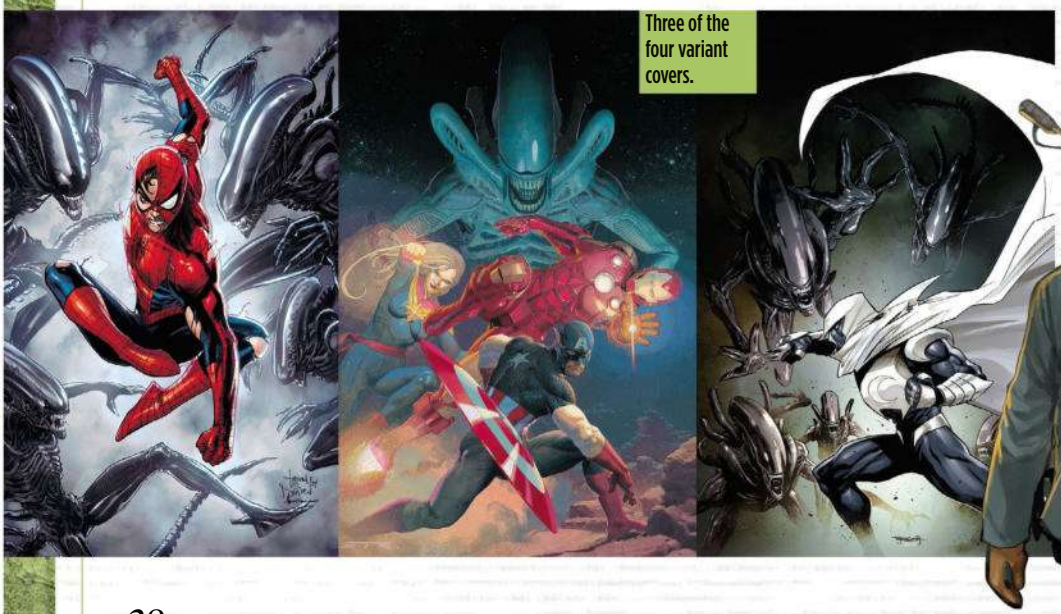
WORLD BUILDING

From Declan Shalvey and Andrea Broccardo's *Alien: Thaw* – which featured *Alien 3*'s Weyland-Yutani Commandos – to Benjamin Percy and Dave Wachter's 2021 one-shot *Aliens: Aftermath*, which revisited the devastated colony on LV-426 35 years later, Marvel's series have occurred at varying points in the *Alien* saga.

But Brunstad won't confirm whether they relate in any way to the imminent *Alien: Romulus*. "*Romulus* is certainly set within a specific window of time, but to say more would be a spoiler," she teases. The recent *Aliens: What If...?*, brainchild of Carter Burke actor Paul Reiser and his son Leon, with co-writers Adam F Goldberg and Hans Rodionoff, also returns to Hadley's Hope to speculate on what might have happened if the villainous Weyland-Yutani exec had survived.

"Paul and Leon had the bones of the story and brought Hans and Adam on board as scripting experts," continues Brunstad. "It's been incredibly fulfilling for fans to see a question they've been teased with for a long time finally answered in some form, and I absolutely hope to do more like it."

With *Aliens Vs Avengers* opening on Earth, Hickman refuses to reveal who exactly makes up the ranks of this particular



Three of the four variant covers.

What if... Carter Burke was back and kicking arse?

Deadpool gets physical in the final cover variant.

Cover art for *Aliens: What If...?* by Phil Noto.

team. "It's kind of a murderers' row of Avengers I've written in the past, so no stone is left unturned," says Hickman, who scripted *The Avengers* and *The New Avengers* between 2013 and 2015. "I don't want to give too much away, but Earth is where the story starts and things extend out from there."

Like Predators, xenomorphs are essentially silent enemies, although their lack of dialogue or inner thought didn't prove to be a problem for Hickman. "There are lots of pieces in the *Alien* universe such as the androids that aren't limited by what they can or cannot say," he says. "But, you know, the shark can't talk in *Jaws* either and we're all the better for it, so I really didn't see that as any limitation."

Having previously collaborated with him on 2013's *Ultimate Comics: The Ultimates* and 2015's *Secret Wars*, Hickman is enjoying re-teaming with Ribić, whose detailed, painted art brings to mind classic '70s sci-fi illustrators like Chris Foss.

"Esad is one of the most talented guys in comics, and when you get to work with someone like that, it's really an exercise in self-restraint," he says. "The guy can literally draw anything, so you have to make sure that you don't get lost in all the great images of your imagination and really focus on the cleanest version of the script. But it looks amazing and there are definitely some Giger nods in there."

Aliens Vs Avengers issue one is out 28 August.

IMMERSION

FROM 1982'S *PAC-MAN* style Atari 2600 title *Alien* to last year's *Aliens: Dark Descent*, the xenomorphs have been the focus of many computer games over the years. But none have taken you so deep into the deadly space predators' fetid environment as Survios's *Alien: Rogue Incursion*, which uses virtual reality to plunge the player into the horrifying, claustrophobic world of the movies.

"One of the reasons we found *Alien* so appealing is that the atmosphere, environment and gameplay all align perfectly with VR," says Survios's Chief Product Officer TQ Jefferson. "Everything is intensified, and nowhere else will you be as immersed as in VR.

"You are literally face-to-face with the xenomorphs as the world feels alive and the atmosphere is palpable. The ability to reach out and interact with the world around you isn't new to VR, but we've tied interactivity to explorations and combat in ways that make you proceed with caution everywhere."

VR THE WORLD

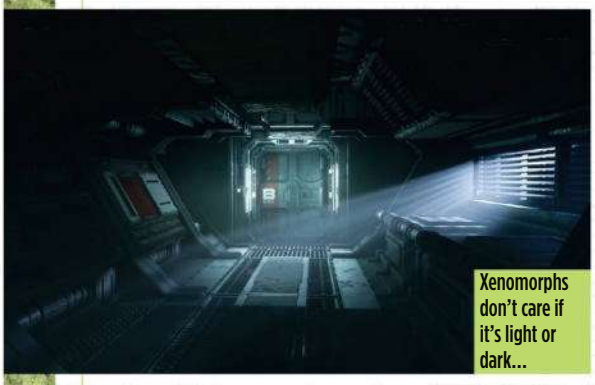
With Jefferson admitting that "the initial path to developing *Alien: Rogue Incursion* was challenging", there were some stops and starts, and even a complete reboot before Project Lead and Lead Engineer Eugene Elkin created an animatic of what the core gameplay should look like.

"It was a video of the player being attacked by several xenomorphs at once," says Jefferson. "The thing that was different and compelling about the video was the behaviour of the xenomorphs, who didn't just run at you in a line. They were employing flanking tactics, feints and sneak attacks from elevation, and they were moving and behaving in a manner that suggested they understood their environment – and that you could defend yourself and take action to compensate and counter. They were acting smart, and that's what we had intended from the beginning."

A single-person shooter, the game sees the player taking on the role of former Colonial Marines Private First Class Zula Hendricks, who debuted in Brian Wood and Tristan Jones's 2016 Dark Horse Comics mini-series *Alien: Defiance*. She has since appeared in numerous comics and novels, including Philippa Ballantine and Clara Čarija's *Alien: Inferno's Fall* and the upcoming *Alien: Seventh Circle*. "*Alien: Rogue Incursion* is Zula's first appearance in a videogame," says Jefferson. "She was tragically injured in her first deployment and then discarded by the corps she loved so much.

"Now in *Alien: Rogue Incursion*, you get to step into her boots, embarking on a dangerous mission to rescue a friend and former squadmate, Benjamin Carver. Her search brings her to Purdan, and the secrets hiding beneath its surface. With her synthetic AI companion Davis 01, Zula must fight her way to the heart of Gemini Exoplanet Solutions' research facility. There you'll need to survive deadly attacks from the most cunning xenomorphs ever encountered and discover new horrors and threats that once unleashed could spell the end for humankind."

Also known as LV-354, Purdan is a "dead rock" – a planet where terraforming wasn't entirely successful. "Part of the reason for that is that Purdan is almost entirely covered in silicate salt," continues Jefferson. "While developing this world, we did a lot of research, speaking with astrophysicists, exogeologists and more to craft a world that would look and feel believable. If you search the coordinates shown for Purdan in our first-look trailer for



Xenomorphs don't care if it's light or dark...

> “So much about the franchise and the xenomorph itself relies on mystery”

VR STATION

NEW VR GAME ALIEN: ROGUE INCURSION PLACES YOU INSIDE THE ALIEN UNIVERSE

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

“Say, I wonder what’s in those eggs? Let’s see.”

the game, they will take you to a real location in the constellation of Virgo, complete with a binary star system like in our trailer. It’s here that we’ve placed the Gemini Exoplanet Solutions research facility, close in galactic terms to events in the film franchise but a blank slate where we can set the events of our game’s story.”

Jefferson enjoyed exploring the xenomorphs’ mythology while developing the game. “So much about the franchise and the xenomorph itself relies on mystery, so we had to really search for answers to many of our questions,” he says.

“The underlying logic, the reasons why, must make sense and align with the rest of the franchise. There’s so much lore that needs to be discussed and understood that players will never see, just for the game to feel authentic and believable, and Disney and 20th Century Studios have been great in providing us with reference materials, even assets from the films, to make our game look and feel authentic.”

Zula is far from invincible. “You’re a former soldier about to jump into an action-packed, dread-filled, no-holds-barred battle against the perfect organism,” teases Jefferson. “All you have, beside your weapons and gear you bring with you, are your wits, skill and intelligence. So explore the world, stay calm under pressure, be ready to fight against terrifying odds and you may just make it out alive!”

Alien: Rogue Incursion will be released later this year.

Some of the environments which await you.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RINGS OF POWER

SHOWRUNNERS JD PAYNE AND PATRICK MCKAY PROMISE PLENTY OF TOLKIEN TREATS IN SEASON TWO

WORDS:
TARA BENNETT

POWER UP

IN 2017, WHEN AMAZON ANNOUNCED IT had acquired the rights to make a five-series streaming show set in JRR Tolkien's *The Lord Of The Rings* universe, eyebrows were raised. Peter Jackson's early noughties trilogy of films remained modern masterpieces, and the seemingly unbeatable benchmark for all Tolkien adaptations.

But Amazon stepped up to the challenge, laying out a massive billion dollar (and counting) budget in order to bring to life the pitch of screenwriters JD Payne and Patrick McKay (*Godzilla Vs Kong*) who wanted to realise the major events of Middle-earth's Second Age, including Sauron's machinations to forge the Rings of Power.

In 2022, audiences got their first taste of Prime Video's gorgeously produced *The Lord Of The Rings: The Rings Of Power*, an impressively acted production which featured many concurrent storylines, including a much-younger Galadriel the Elf's (Morfydd Clark) obsessive hunt for the Dark Lord Sauron (Charlie Vickers); the appearance of a mysterious Stranger (Daniel Weyman) in Harfoot territory; the leadership strife in the kingdom of Númenor; and the rise of Orcs in the Southland. The first series of eight episodes earned Prime Video a reported 100 million viewers globally, numerous award nominations, and the buy-in of plenty of very discerning Tolkien fans. Two years later, season two is nigh, and it's going to get dark. Payne and McKay tell *SFX* that their Middle-earth epic is going to try even harder this time to exude what made Tolkien's books literary classics.

"People respond to hope. People respond to wonder. People respond to great characters, fantastical worlds, danger with humility, resiliency and fellowship," Payne rattles off. "These are all the things that make Tolkien resonate with people. We realised that when we're immersed in those things, the stories work. So we really just wanted to double down on all those things."

By the first series finale, "Alloyed", all of the show's major plotlines and characters were established, and most importantly, the Elven smith Celebrimbor (Charles Edwards) had been masterfully duped by Halbrand/Sauron into forging the first three Rings.

"Season one was really about building out this world and then setting up all the characters," McKay explains. "It was helping people understand what Middle-earth is and what it isn't this time, and what's important to these worlds and the people who live within them. In season two, now we get to play.

"Evil has returned to Middle-earth," he continues, "and peace is threatened from minute one. We really hit the ground running. If season one was a season about heroes and bringing audiences back to Middle-earth, season two is dominated by the villains and by the evil of Sauron. That means it's going to be darker."

Having scored some major wins against humans, Elves and Galadriel in particular, McKay says Sauron is going to continue to transform into whomever he needs to be in order to achieve his ultimate goal. "Season one was the only season when we could hide Sauron in plain sight and he could deceive the audience. That created a challenge in terms of the discipline of the storytelling. But now it reaps the incredible reward in season two of the jack is out of the box."

"In some ways, the core of season two is the Sauron/Celebrimbor relationship"

With his Halbrand persona exposed, Sauron will instead become the "Lord of Gifts", the Elf Annatar, who arrives in Eregion to encourage Celebrimbor to keep forging. "Just thinking structurally about the series as a whole, we've admired shows in the past where a minor

Damrod the Hill-Troll has a quick chat with Adar.

Sam Hazeldine as Adar (left), with an, er, friend.

character in one series might become a major character in another series, and vice versa," McKay explains. "So season two is Sauron's story, and Sauron's story is that he's going to deceive and seduce Celebrimbor, the Elven da Vinci, into crafting the Rings of Power that he needs to conquer the world.

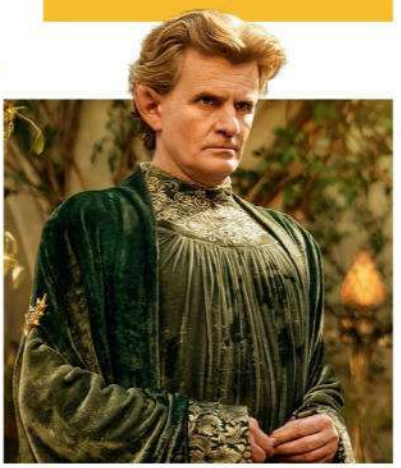
"That necessitates Celebrimbor becoming a major character as well. In some ways, the core of season two is the Sauron/Celebrimbor relationship that pushes the show into new territory. There is this toxic relationship/psychological thriller in the dynamic between the two of them." But worry not for Galadriel, who McKay says is still "a major, major part" of the second season.

They pick up with their flawed heroine still smarting about getting played so thoroughly by Halbrand. It's left her questioning how to correct her grievous mistake in allowing Sauron a foothold back in Middle-earth.

"One thing we love about Galadriel is what a hero she is," Payne observes. "In season one, she's so sure. I think all of us have been there before, where there's something we're just so confident about and we're chasing it with every →

Rory Kinnear as Tom Bombadil (left).

PICTURES: AMAZON MGM STUDIOS, STOCK ELEMENTS: NEUEVECTOR/GETTY



Power Corrupted

Charles Edwards's Celebrimbor, the Elven smith, becomes a pawn of evil

Celebrimbor forged three Rings of Power. Is he riding high?

No. We meet him when he is kind of wrong-footed. No one is talking to him. All communication has been cut off. So he's at a loose end. He's at sea. Once again, [Sauron] turns up as he did in season one, and Annatar unlocks that little seed. He's at a vulnerable point and then yes, it gets quite grim for Celebrimbor from then on.

It feels like you and Charlie are in your own two-hander play this series, set inside the forge. Did you think of it that way?

Yes. The scenes were shot in order, and to come to work every day to our set, it did feel like a play with just essentially the two of us and the occasional visitor. There are occasional forays into the immediate outside of the city. [Executive producer] Lindsey Weber called it, "You get to go in the room where it happened."

How would you describe their power dynamics this season?

Both have power to offer the other. It's a bargain. It's a give and take. It becomes a kind of cat and mouse, sometimes. It becomes highly manipulative, with a bit of gaslighting going on and mind games. But Annatar can't operate without me and I can't operate without him at this point.

Should we expect Celebrimbor to wilt under the eye of evil?

Well, I wanted to suggest that what we didn't see on-screen could be quite violent, sometimes. A fear develops, and that would manifest itself in flinching very slightly when [Annatar] spoke suddenly.

I wanted to build up a picture of someone who in private was becoming very wary and a little frightened. I enjoy doing these little things that open up the life beneath. As you'll see, he becomes more and more physically frail as we go on.

Ismael Cruz Córdova as Arondir and Maxim Baldry as Isildur.

fibre of our being. For her, that certainty and pride ends up unwittingly bringing about the very restoration of the evil that she's trying to fight and stamp out. That's such a horrifying thing for her."

"Season two is a reckoning for her, where she's going to now have to accept her own responsibility and face the darkest part of herself to overcome it, and move on," McKay continues. "I think you're going to start to see her attain that wisdom and vulnerability. Morfydd can play anything, so for us it's just the luxury of working her through each of these phases of her development. Season two is a big step for that character. It has really humbled her, brought her low and really shattered some relationships."

The primary one is her relationship with Elrond (Robert Aramayo), the much more even-keeled Elven counsellor, who warned Galadriel to be more wary, but was summarily ignored. "It's broken the relationship of trust she had with Elrond, most of all," Payne says. "She wasn't straightforward with him, so that's a relationship that's going to have to be very carefully repaired.

"We love Robert and Morfydd together, so season two was designed as a journey for the two of them to go on, that really sees them each in unfamiliar territory. [Elrond] having to go from being a politician to being a warrior, by the end of the season.

"And Galadriel having to repair her relationship by being able to follow Elrond, while Elrond is going on a journey. Part of that is how they're working to repair their broken trust while they're each supporting each other and realising how each of them were right in certain stages."

STRANGER THINGS

Another story that captured the attention of viewers was that of the Stranger, a great bear of a man who can't remember where he came from – and harbours incredible magical powers that he doesn't understand, or know how to control. He has since set out with Nori Brandyfoot (Markella Kavenagh) to find answers in the hitherto unseen on-screen Lands of Rhûn.

There's a lot of speculation that the Stranger is actually the legendary wizard Gandalf, before he becomes great. Payne will neither confirm nor deny this. But he promises that the character's true name will be revealed this season.

"We encourage audience members not to just watch it for the name," Payne adds. "Watch it for the journey, because he himself is going on a journey of discovery. The name is part of that. But really, it's about learning what is it to be a wizard?

"That's the fun of it all, right? In Middle-earth, you never know what you're gonna get"

Why has he been sent to Middle-earth? What are his powers? How does he control his powers? How should he use his powers? Who is he going to fight with his powers? What's that going to mean for him as a character, psychologically? The name will be a part of that, but it's not the whole sundae. It's the cherry on top."

The pair also promise plenty of big stand-out moments this series. Some will satisfy keen Tolkien readers, like the introduction of Tom Bombadil (Rory Kinnear) who first appeared in *The Fellowship Of The Ring*, as well as the build-up to the Battle of Eregion, as referenced in *The Silmarillion*.

McKay teases that they will also continue to augment Tolkien's lore with their own original expansions. "This season, we have an incredible sequence involving the character Arondir [Ismael Cruz Córdova] in the middle of the season, where he's going to uncover a mystery that will lead him to a very surprising encounter with a pair of Ents.

"They are the shepherds of the forest, which are talking, walking trees," he details. "Ents are a thing that we know exist in Middle-earth but we've never *seen* a couple of Ents, including an Ent wife. So that's an instance of a thing that ostensibly is not a moment fans have been anticipating, or expecting to happen on the way to the road to the Battle of Eregion.

"There's a lot of moments in-between that are hopefully just as delightful, or maybe even more surprising. But that's the fun of it all, right? In Middle-earth, you never know what you're gonna get."

Reflecting on what they've been able to produce this series with their huge team of creatives, including heads of departments like production designer Kristian Milsted, costume designer Luca Mosca, hair and make-up head Flora Moody, casting director Theo Park and visual effects supervisor Jason Smith, McKay says their joint intention has been to wow audiences beyond what they achieved in the first series.

"They're gonna get a different flavour of ice cream this time," he says. "I think that's the exciting part and the thrilling part – and it'll be potentially different again next time. Middle-earth is vast and contains many tones, and hopefully with season two, we're bringing some real new ones to the table."

The Lord Of The Rings: The Rings Of Power is on Prime Video from 29 August.

Peter Mullan as King Durin III (and his nose).

Charlie Vickers as Annatar, aka Sauron. Eek!

Morfydd Clark as Galadriel meets a Barrow-Wight.

The Puppet Master

Charlie Vickers brings to life the Dark Lord's next form, Annatar the Elf

Where did you start when it came to shaping Sauron in the guise of Annatar?

I wanted to make sure that it had real grounding in what Tolkien wrote, and what Tolkien would have wanted from the character. It's the first time we're seeing Annatar on screen, so I had to work from kind of where I started with Halbrand, in that sense that Sauron wants to reorganise and rehabilitate Middle-earth.

Obviously, it's a new set of circumstances. He's put himself back in Eregion with Celebrimbor. He has to start to appeal to a different person and try to manipulate and wield his magic over someone else.

Annatar is the third iteration of Sauron we see in the series. What makes him different?

In creating Annatar, we all had to come from a place of, "What would Celebrimbor want? Who would Celebrimbor listen to?" You're talking about one of the greatest Elven smiths. Probably one of the coolest guys in Middle-earth. No one is above him, so who would he respond to? That influenced the way that I looked, the way that I walked, the way that I talked. I had to feel like Annatar had this wisdom, this otherworldly quality and a great sense of knowledge that I could bring to him.

Do you think of Sauron and Annatar as the same entity?

Ultimately, Annatar is Sauron and Sauron is Annatar. But you do see Annatar kind of develop into the latter as the season goes on. It's more of a taking of his own power as he gets closer and closer to what he sees as his destiny. I didn't want to portray him as this all-seeing, all-conquering villain, because he isn't there yet. He becomes that. But at this stage, these rings are something he has been working on in his mind for centuries and he's finally met the person that can bring them into creation. I am just as desperate as he is to get this done – if not more desperate, because the stakes are really high. It's through that that you see the character develop. It comes from a place of desperation and truth rather than any sort of growing villainy.

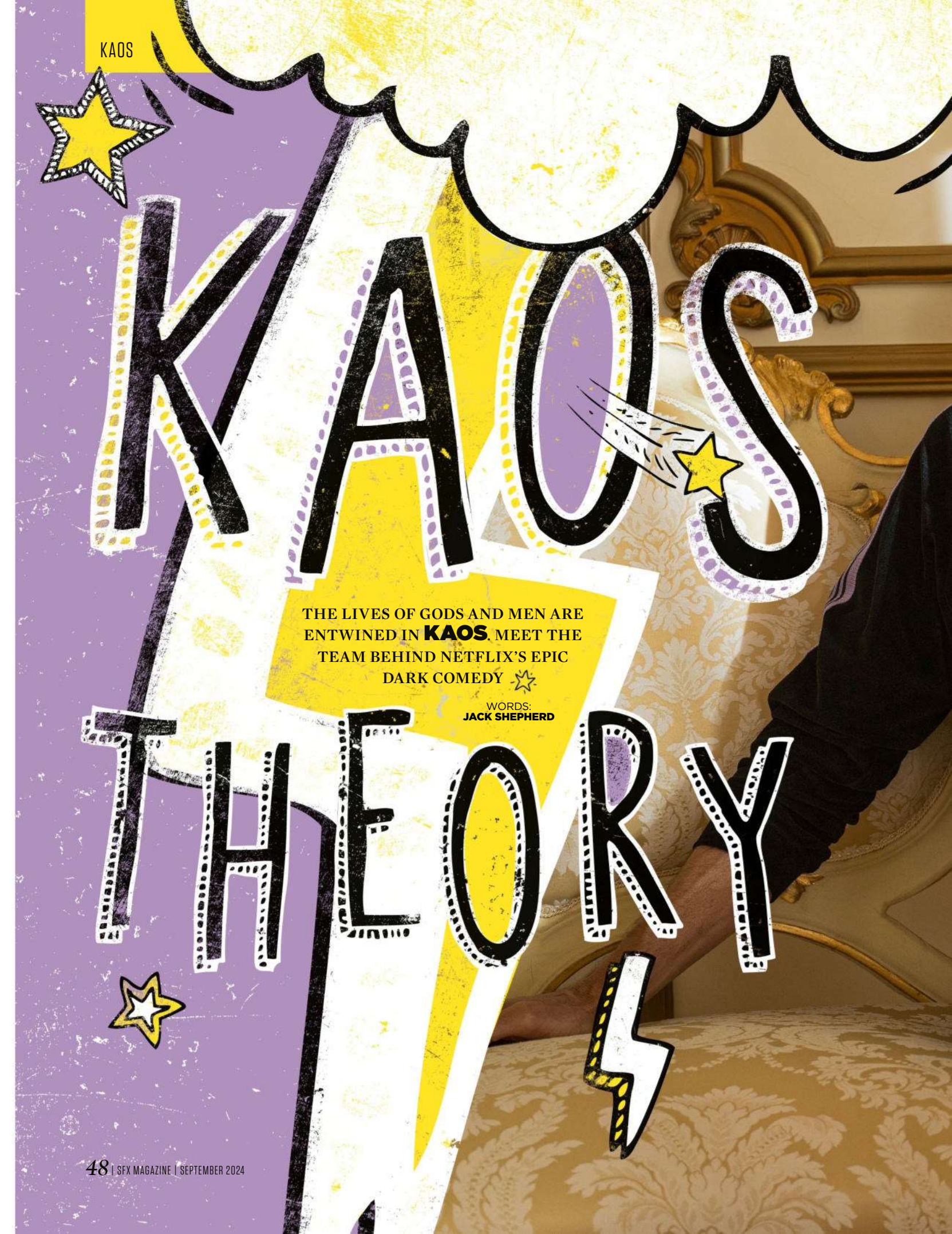
There's still unfinished business between Sauron and Galadriel. Is a reckoning imminent?

I feel like it will be a constant throughout the rest of the show. It's good versus evil, and the ease with which good can be tempted and flipped into evil. It's a very fine line in this world. She rejects him, so there is forever that unresolved conflict and unresolved relationship. I think as long as the show endures, their relationship will endure.

KAOS THEORY

THE LIVES OF GODS AND MEN ARE ENTWINED IN KAOS. MEET THE TEAM BEHIND NETFLIX'S EPIC DARK COMEDY

WORDS:
JACK SHEPHERD



CHARLIE COVELL WAS BETWEEN takes on her mythological series *Kaos* when she witnessed a miraculous moment. Jeff Goldblum, who plays Zeus, king of the Greek gods, had just filmed a scene with Suzy Eddie Izzard, who portrays Lachesis, one of the three Fates. They sat down for a break from the baking hot Spanish sun and Covell – previously best known for creating *The End Of The F**king World* – joined them.

"I had loved both of them since I was tiny," Covell tells *SFX*. "I didn't know where to put myself, and she did the Death Star Canteen skit just for me and Jeff." That *Star Wars* skit is legendary; one of the best-known pieces of British comedy in recent history.

"I was just like, 'I think I could die today, that would be fine, this is the best day of my life,'" laughs Covell. "Then Jeff was acting out parts of *The Godfather*. Then they would do the scenes together that I had written. It was a definite high point."

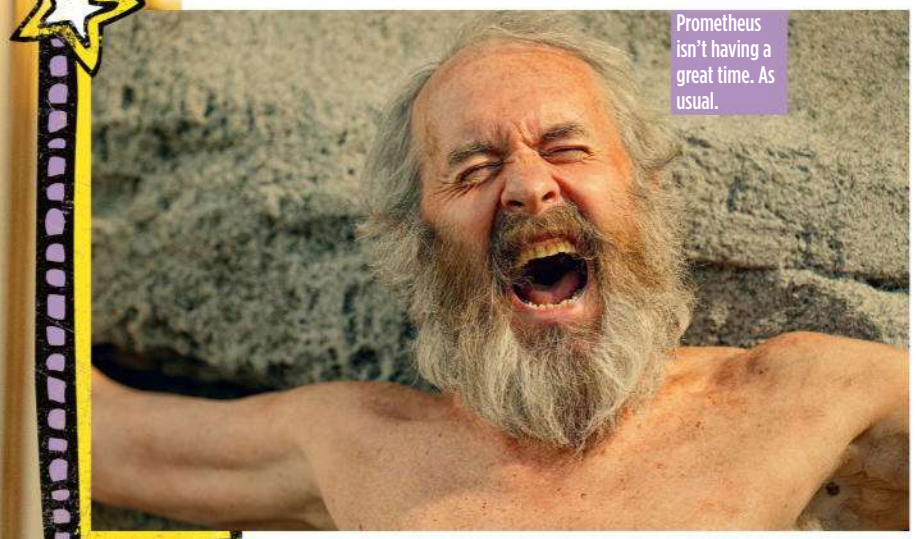
That combination of comedy, pure star power and a certain, unquantifiable Britishness encapsulates the bones of *Kaos*, a series that sees the lives of the Greek gods threatened by a prophecy slowly coming true. It's a wonderfully creative work with Goldblum at its centre as the tracksuit-wearing, paranoid and vengeful Zeus, who wants nothing more than to retain his idyllic life on Mount Olympus. However, after a wrinkle appears on his forehead and the humans below him start to protest against his rule, the world is thrown into chaos.

What makes *Kaos* so intriguing is that this isn't set in some bygone era but in a strange, twisted version of our modern world where corrupt dictators rule and minotaurs exist. The gods are essentially an allegory for the one per cent who enjoy life without doing any actual work.

Who's a good Cerberus, then? Time for walkies!

"I didn't want to write a political piece," Covell says. "It's about abuses of power and gods playing around with humans. I'm aware, of course, that allegory is there. But I wasn't trying to do something that's a state of the nation piece. It was more taking these timeless myths and putting them in a contemporary space and then messing around them, trying to reinvent stuff."

Janet McTeer as Hera and Jeff Goldblum as Zeus.



Prometheus isn't having a great time. As usual.

"It was always about juxtaposing grandiosity and mythology and these massive themes"

Davies, who previously worked on *I Hate Suzie*] wanted it to feel like a Bethnal Green working men's club, but then we put these famous classical figures there – we put Orpheus and Dionysus in that pub. That's what I wanted the show to be at its heart."

Covell concentrated on finding a balance between humour and drama, as well as "darkness and levity and horror", as she puts it. As a result, the series has a British feel – similar to Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman's *Good Omens* – something helped further by an array of familiar actors, including Izzard, David Thewlis and Billie Piper.

"I think moments of it feel very specific, like the pub, but then Olympus doesn't feel British," Covell says. "*End Of The F**king* World looked and felt American, but it was British. You're trying to make this world authentic. How do you do that? I suppose it was just creating characters who feel rooted where they were. Because the show is in multiple worlds, it's okay if the worlds are different, but the tone has to be consistent."

Those different worlds revolve not just around the gods on Mount Olympus, but also a few humans. Aurora Perrineau plays Riddy, a woman who's very ready to break up with her rockstar boyfriend Orpheus, portrayed by Killian Scott.

Their relationship drives Orpheus's story, especially as Nabhaan Rizwan's Dionysus – the half-human, half-god son of Zeus – gets involved. Then there's Leila Farzad's Ari, the daughter of Crete's ruler, who struggles with her own sense of self.

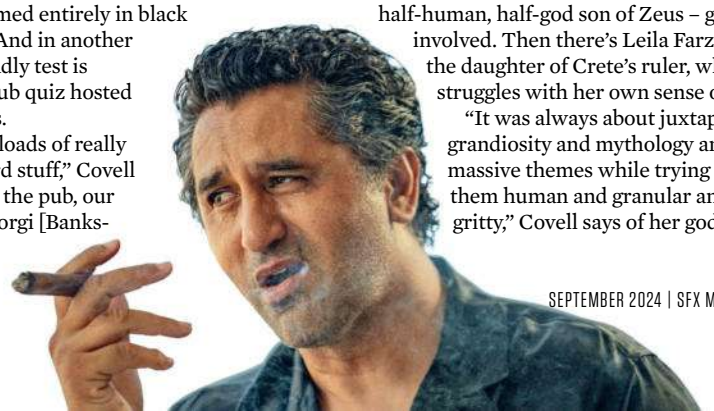
"It was always about juxtaposing grandiosity and mythology and these massive themes while trying to make them human and granular and gritty," Covell says of her gods and Orpheus and Eurydice, Persephone and Hades. There's some stuff I've played very fast and loose with. I'm hoping for forgiveness, not asking for permission. It's so amazing to have been able to do it."

David Thewlis as Hades (left): desk job hell.

The series is full to the brim with creative ideas. Within the first few episodes, we witness Hera, the jealous and vengeful goddess of marriage, women and childbirth (played by Janet McTeer), standing before a wall of tongues, listening to the secrets being shared by humans down on Earth. Another character travels on a ferry boat to the underworld, which is filmed entirely in black and white. And in another scene, a deadly test is actually a pub quiz hosted by the Fates.

"There's loads of really gnarly, weird stuff," Covell teases. "For the pub, our director Georgi [Banks-

Covell's mission statement is clear in the first scene she wrote: Zeus goes for a run to see Prometheus, who's strapped to the side of a cliff, his body being pecked by birds, and they share a cigarette together. "It's Zeus having a midlife crisis," she says. "That's funny to me. His best friend is strapped to a cliff. He put him there but he kind of loves him. That's interesting. Then I always wanted to go into



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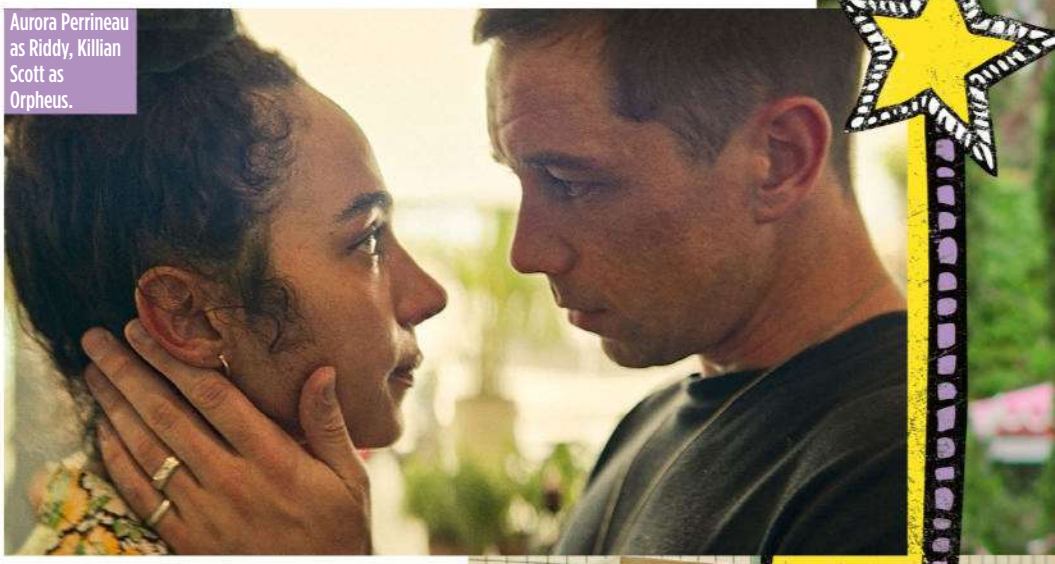

Aurora Perrineau as Riddy, Killian Scott as Orpheus.

humans. "I remember writing the first draft, and I love Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* and that introduction to Verona – that was always in my head when I was thinking about Crete and the human world and how we were going to access that."

Our human heroes' journeys take them to distant lands and different boozers, and all the while the series remains, at its core, very dryly funny. "The actors we cast have funny bones," Covell says. "They all sit in a territory whereby they can shift the tone in their delivery. They will turn on a sixpence from being funny and weird to being really horrifying."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, everything, no matter which story we're following, ends up relating back to Goldblum's Zeus. He brings consistency to every thread, and although we've seen Zeus on screen many times – whether in *Clash Of The Titans* (one of Covell's favourites) or as played by Russell Crowe in *Thor: Love And Thunder* – we have never seen him portrayed quite like this. The part feels written specifically for the *Jurassic Park* actor, yet intriguingly was originally meant to be played by Hugh Grant, who pulled out due to scheduling conflicts.

"Jeff was a really natural fit," Covell says. "He's also so collaborative. One of the first things Jeff, Georgi and I did was sit in his trailer for four or five hours, and he's just amazing. He had everything, all the scripts, and he went through all his scenes, talking through it, asking questions. Then on set, he would improv and we would talk about certain lines that he wanted to try. He was always very respectful. He's just amazing. He really is."

LIFE OF THE GODS

Covell's unique take on the gods stems back to her own childhood. She was, she's told, obsessed with the Greek myths, having endlessly pored over the pages of an illustrated book when she was very young. Then she saw *Clash Of The Titans* and watched it religiously on repeat.

"I was quite an intense child," she jokes. In adult life, she acted in a play about Greek political figures being judged in the underworld, but the underworld was a bureaucratic mess. That's when the idea for *Kaos* took shape. As she began writing, she was inspired by other unique takes on mythology, such as Caroline Duffy's *The World's Wife*, a collection of poetry about the difficulties and ill-treatment women have faced throughout classic texts, as well as Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, in which Penelope, wife of Odysseus, looks back upon her life.

> **"Jeff Goldblum was always very respectful. He's just amazing. He really is"**

"It was just really funny and fresh, and I was drawn to a fresh take on mythology that would allow quite a lot of reimagining," Covell says.

There ended up being few things from Greek mythology that Covell left off the table for possible adaptation. However, she knew that she did not want to do the Trojan War, as she found the idea of battles uninteresting (though the fallout of that specific conflict is felt in the series). Instead, she put a magnifying glass to the seediness of some of those famous stories, resulting in a lot of on-screen sex. Gasp!

"You want to keep true to the essence of the myth and I don't think you can sanitise that side of it," Covell says. "It shows the abuse of power. The fucking with mortals, literally and figuratively.

"That was a key thing, where you have the big scale, the macro, as well as the individual stories. We didn't want a pre-watershed version of the show. With the myths, I don't know that that feels right. It's inherent to the myths."

Kids: ask your grandparents about this thing.

There's bountiful ground for Covell to explore across multiple seasons, should Netflix renew the series. For now, the showrunner merely confirms that "it could continue" into the future, without supplying further detail.

At this point she's simply thrilled that *Kaos* has come this far. "It just feels so amazing to have been able to do it, and that people have backed the idea and the vision and made it real," she says.

If all else fails, someone just needs to stream Izzard doing the Death Star canteen routine and Jeff Goldblum doing *The Godfather* impressions. Netflix subscriptions will go through the roof.

Kaos is on Netflix from 29 August.

All scenes set in the underworld are monochrome.

Someone's feeling a bit overdressed for Hell.

Goddess of Secrets

Janet McTeer talks playing the vindictive Hera, who treats humans like ants

You share a lot of scenes with Jeff Goldblum.
There's a wonderful energy to him. He would play with the scenes, and we would play together, and Charlie captured that essence. Zeus is powerful and strong and he's Jeff. He's iconic. Jeff is old-school like me, he's done a lot. We found such a lot of genuine enjoyment from each other.

What is Hera and Zeus's relationship like?
They've been married for 1,000 years and they get irritated with each other, yet they adore each other. It's quite complicated, the way all marriages are. Then there are the humans. They're annoying and should be just got rid of, and Hera does get quite jealous when Zeus sleeps with all these other women and has babies. She does tend to kill them. I just tried to imagine human beings as ants, so I really don't care about them. I'm very happy to buy ant spray and put it outside of my door.

What drew you to the project?
I've been around a long time. I'm always drawn to something that's new and interesting and its own thing. Rather than reading this and thinking, "I've read a version of this before", it felt genuinely new and unique. Charlie's writing is just so brilliant. There's this heightened sense of, you're playing a god, yet the whole piece is an allegory for our modern world.

What does that mean for Hera?
For Hera, it's about the cost to keep her life the way it is. She doesn't care about the world, or about people. She just wants her life to be great. At this point in the story – bearing in mind, it's a *Groundhog Day* of endless, infinite, sunny Italian days for her – it was about something changing because of the prophecy. Now she has to ask herself, "What am I the god of? Do I want everything to stay the same?" That had been unquestioned for so long.

What was the biggest challenge?
Trying to find a tone with Hera, as she's a god, and at the same time it's a domestic drama. It's not a kitchen sink drama, because they are gods, but it had to be both elevated and normal. What I really like about the series is it doesn't underestimate the intelligence of the audience. Because audiences are wicked smart. So the audience has fun while the story becomes slowly darker.

King of the Gods

Zeus actor Jeff Goldblum awards ten "Goldblums" and talks being "ribbled" by Kaos

Zeus is a god trapped in a corner by a prophecy...
He's complicated. He's charismatic. He's cruel. The three Cs. And he's in a corner, a fourth C. It's of his own making because he has sought and achieved a position of power, a position of authority, which is a mistake. As within our current world, wealth and authority's not real power. When nature comes a-calling, it levels the playing field for everyone. Real power is being able to contribute something that is useful to society.

What made you go, "I need to play this character"? Because you stood in for Hugh Grant at the last minute.
Any part that Hugh Grant has abandoned, that's the only box I need to check.

No, the real answer is Charlie Covell. She gets 10 Goldblums out of a possible 10 Goldblums. As a person and an artist, Charlie is terrific. I read this thing and liked it terrifically. It was a good, juicy, meaty part.

But I've come to believe that you can't be good in something that overall isn't good, and it's hard to make a good movie – especially an eight-hour movie in this golden age of long-form TV – and it was my humble opinion that this could work. It was unexpected and emotional and very moving. Wait till you see the performances. I love this whole cast.

How did you get into the headspace of a god?
I'm just trying to fulfil every aspect of that. If you're asking seriously, you learn the lines and put on those clothes. We worked hard on the clothing and presentation. In the script, it describes how he's wearing these tracksuits. My wife had an heirloom from her great-grandfather, this Napoleonic gold coin, and he made a ring out of it.

I said, "Maybe I can wear that as Zeus." And, you know, who isn't a megalomaniac in some way? You can easily tap into that. But it's challenging. He's particularly cruel and frightened and feels under siege, and he's complicated and rich and funny and charismatic.

He has a lot of sex too...
It is explicit. I mean, I saw *Clash Of The Titans* and *Jason And The Argonauts* when I was young. I've never seen such a sexy and romantic and moving version of the Greek myths as this one. I'm crazy about this version. I've never been so ribbled by it.

THE DARK KNIGHT RISES IN VINTAGE STYLE IN BATMAN: CAPED CRUSADER

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

Hamish Linklater voices Batman.

Commissioner Jim Gordon (Eric Morgan Stuart).

Selina/ Catwoman is voiced by Christina Ricci.

Jamie Chung portrays a new Harley Quinn.

"BATMAN IS NOT FRIENDLY," insists Bruce Timm. "He has to be weird. It's not just enough for him to dress up like a weirdo – he has to *be* a weirdo. When Batman's in the room you shouldn't say, 'Oh, yeah, it's Batman... hey, how you doing, Batman?' It's like, no, 'Who is this weird guy?'"

Timm has more claim than most to know Gotham's elusive avenger. If not fast friends they must, at least, be on nodding terms in the shadows. Back in the early '90s he was one of the key creative forces behind *Batman: The Animated Series*, a stylish, retro-flavoured take on the DC icon, smarter, cooler and altogether more Emmy-winning than the usual network 'toon. Now he's back with *Batman: Caped Crusader*, a series that finally makes good on his original vision for the Dark Knight and his world. Welcome to the 1940s, Mac...

TIMELESS CHARM

"We decided early on that we didn't want it to be a continuation of *B:TAS*," Timm tells *SFX* of the ten-episode debut season that boasts Matt Reeves and JJ Abrams as executive producers. "We wanted to use a lot of the same building materials but do something different with them, so that we weren't just doing remakes of the old shows, or sequels to the old stories.

"The decidedly period nature of it is something that I really wanted to do, going back to the beginning of *B:TAS*. If I'd had my way I would have set that show directly in the '40s, but during the development process it became apparent that would probably have been a sticking point in terms of all the different people we'd have to get approvals from, like Fox Kids and the toy companies.

"The writers were like, 'It's so much more convenient if we have TV and computers...' It just became this more wishy-washy, retro-ish world."

"We wanted this to feel as though it was made in the '40s, whereas *B:TAS* didn't feel like that," adds executive producer James Tucker, a fellow veteran of DC's animated universe. "It had a '40s milieu, if you will, but it's still very much a '90s show."

"James and I definitely wanted to lean much more into the period of it," says Timm, "both in terms of the technology and also the cars and the fashions and the hairstyles. I've always been a fan of that era in terms of the movies – the monster movies and the serials, the film noir and stuff like that."

While the show places Bruce Wayne and his cowled alter ego in the era of *Double Indemnity* and Betty Grable, it's not bound by any specific year – and that's by design.

"I never want to say what date it is," says Timm. "That's something James and I both have a burr up our shorts about. There's a big swathe of fans who like to put things on timelines. 'Oh, there's a date on the screen in *B:TAS* that says 199-whatever, so *Justice League* was in the year 2001...' That's so limiting. Do we want to mention the war? No, because that's too big a thing."

"It's not history," stresses Tucker. "It's not a documentary. There weren't guys running around in Batsuits in the '40s! It's not reality. It's a fantasy set in the '40s."

"And we wanted more in terms of inclusion," Timm explains. "We love characters like Renee Montoya. Yeah, they didn't have female police detectives very much back in the day, but we wanted to have that.

"We didn't want things that were too anachronistic-seeming in this world. We would police all of the dialogue during the writing stages, so we could make sure we didn't have colloquialisms that were too modern-sounding. The same with the acting. When we were casting people we'd say, 'Oh, that person sounds too contemporary.' Even in story situations we'd say, 'If we reference such-and-such a technology, when did that actually become a thing?' and we would stretch that a little bit.

"They actually did have TV back in the 1940s but it was very crude and not very widespread. We just wanted to make sure that the technology of the series looked very 1940s, even if it's a little far-fetched."

"We were often surprised by just how older things were than we were aware of," says Tucker. "That was always coming up."

This period setting returns Batman to his roots, to the stew of two-fisted, noir-drenched adventure that originally shaped Bob Kane and Bill Finger's hero.

"This series is really a reimagining of that first year of Batman comics," shares Tucker.

NEXT OF QUINN

Meet a dangerously different Harley

"Rule number one was we wanted to separate her from the Joker," says Bruce Timm of *Batman: Caped Crusader*'s unsettling reimagining of Harley Quinn. "We didn't want her to be the Joker's girlfriend. Not that there's anything wrong with that, because that's obviously a big part of her character and her appeal. But we thought, 'If we separate her from the Joker, what can we do with her to make her just as interesting?'

"We threw a bunch of ideas around and ended up with this idea that it's kind of a flip. Rather than Harleen Quinzel being very serious and then when she becomes Harley she's silly and funny, what if it's different? Can we do a flirty, more fun version of Harleen – and when she's Harley can we make her kind of scary?"

"She uses her psychiatry background as her weapon, which wasn't part of the original Harley," observes James Tucker.

Timm co-created the original Harley Quinn, who debuted in *Batman: The Animated Series*. How far can you twist these cherished characters and still keep fans onboard?

"Well, that's to be determined, isn't it?" he laughs. "It's the beauty of the Batman universe. Not just him but also all the supporting characters and villains. Everything from the serials to the Adam West show to the Frank Miller comics to the movies – the Tim Burton movies, the Christopher Nolan movies... They're all really different but they all are valid. They all bring something to the table. These characters, you can really bend them and stretch them. There's so many different ways you can go with them."

Alfred Pennyworth, voiced by Jason Watkins.

"That was our jumping-off point. And like that first year it was influenced by what was going on in pulp fiction at the time."

"A lot of it has to do with Batman's personality and the way I see him," says Timm. "On *B:TAS* we ended up having to make him more likeable and more human than I initially wanted. A lot of the way I personally think about Batman is influenced by my early teenage love of pulp characters like Doc Savage and the Shadow and the Avenger. Those characters were all very remote. They weren't cuddly, they weren't huggers, they didn't crack jokes. That's kinda how I saw Batman.

"I couldn't get the writers to write that character back in the day. Not only that, but Fox Kids wouldn't have approved it. They would have said, 'No, no, kids have to like him!' So that was the one thing I really wanted to do, and something that James backed me up on. It's a cool way of approaching Batman.

> **"We wanted this to feel as though it was made in the '40s"**

We made a concerted effort at every stage to keep him from just being Bruce Wayne wearing a mask."

This more chilling incarnation – closer to the "weird figure of the dark" established in 1939 – is voiced by Hamish Linklater, stepping up to fill the Bat-boots of the late, beloved Kevin Conroy.

"We had a lot of good auditions with different actors," says Timm. "Surprisingly, we had a lot of good-sounding Batman actors but very few who could make Bruce Wayne as charming as we wanted him to be. Batman is very monotone, very quiet, very restrained. But we figured Bruce Wayne is not really a person. He's Batman's idea of what Bruce Wayne would sound like.

"He watched a lot of Cary Grant movies, to give him an idea of how charming and what a bon vivant Bruce Wayne would be. We had a hard time finding actors who could give us that effervescent, fake but not obviously fake charm, and Hamish nailed it. He brought the two sides of that coin perfectly."

"It had to be a different take on the character but still feel like Batman," Tucker says. "Hamish really brought that weird off-kilterness while still being barrel-chested Batman. It's a hard needle to thread."

Christina Ricci voices a glamorous, mischievous Selina Kyle, also inspired by the original take in the comic books. "There's been a million different versions of Catwoman, and a lot of them are great," says Timm. "We specifically said, 'Let's not do the *B:TAS* Catwoman again.' James and I both love the original Catwoman's costume design, so let's start with that, and extrapolate. And that's what we did.

"Early on, we said, 'What if she's more of a screwball comedy version of Catwoman?' We wanted her to be like this wacky heiress, like Katharine Hepburn in *Bringing Up Baby*. Christina was able to make her fun and kind of flighty, but also not sound contemporary. She got it, the minute we told her that, and she just brought it."

While this Catwoman is faithful to the early days of the comics, others in Batman's immortal rogues' gallery have had radical revamps. Episode one reimagines the Penguin as a rotund, brolly-toting woman – Oswalda Cobblepot, no less.

"We said, 'Okay, what is it about the Penguin that's interesting, and what did we do with the Penguin from the old show that we liked?'" remembers Timm. "There wasn't a whole lot. We also said, 'We need more female villains – what if we gender-flipped the Penguin, what does that give you?' It was really just an odd idea. I mentioned it to James and he came back with these sketches of this really extreme looking Weimar Republic/Bertolt Brecht version of the Penguin. I was like, 'Oh my god, that's awesome.' So that gave us the impetus for that story."

Tucker smiles. "That was kind of a mission statement for how different we wanted the show to be."

"You call that a knife...?" And so on.

Both: "If only they knew who I am".

Batman: Caped Crusader is on Prime Video from 1 August.

DAY OF THE JACKAL

TALKING TIME, TECH AND MYSTERIES IN PART TWO OF OUR INTERVIEW WITH **DOCTOR WHO** SHOWRUNNER **RUSSELL T DAVIES**

WORDS:
DARREN SCOTT

Millie Gibson's Ruby Sunday, lost in time and space.

WHEN WE SIT down with Russell T Davies to discuss season one of *Doctor Who*, we've recently seen the finale – though at the time it's yet to air – and we genuinely didn't know who was going to return in it, despite catching some online rumours. "What, so you had no idea it was Sutekh? Those rumours were an absolute fucker. We tried and tried and tried..." he sighs.

So much for "no old monsters" – this story idea has been rattling around with Davies since 1975, when he first saw Tom Baker story "Pyramids Of Mars". "Yes, the greatest monster ever. It's taken this long. I've always had that Sue Tech pun in mind. Did you see that coming...?"

When people started mentioning "Pyramids Of Mars", we thought, surely he can't be talking about *Sue's tech*...

Exactly what it was! I like to think of Sutekh clinging to the TARDIS thinking, "I know what I'll do, I'll slide in via a pun!" I think having clung to the TARDIS since 1975 that he was probably getting pretty bored.

I mean, ['80s producer] John Nathan-Turner started this. Before his Master puns, they didn't exist in *Doctor Who*, did they? Once he introduced Neil Toynay [as Master actor Anthony Ainley was credited for episode four of 1982's "Castrovalva"], we all *loved* that. Remember there was no other information in those days but we'd scour the *Radio Times* – and people still do that, it's become part of the language of the show.

In this series we've had bogeymen who are actual bogeys, and now we've got Susan technology played by a woman called Susan Twist. I just love that. Like a show for the modern age, it will get people talking about it. How deliberate is Susan Twist's surname? I literally had it in mind casting her.

So why Sutekh?

To be absolutely honest, there were a lot of reasons for Sutekh. I was very much aware that some people probably abandoned or decried the show because we're now connected with the big streamer. Unfairly, but that's a natural, cynical, and, dare I say, British response to moving onto a big level of production, and I understand that's not a mad response. I might look at other shows and do that myself and think, "Ooh, they've sold out."

So I *absolutely* – even before we'd chosen the streamer, even before we had the deal in place – knew that by going on to a bigger level show, we needed to bring back a great, big old enemy to say, "This is the same show." I think possibly there will be some viewers who will say, "That's not for me now, I've moved away from *Doctor Who*... Oh my god, Sutekh, I'll come back." Surely there will be some pickup, surely some people will come and look, because Sutekh's back and because it's voiced by Gabriel Woolf, by the original actor.

So that was a very deliberate policy to kind of say to anyone who might have wandered away from the show: come back and look, this is still the same show. It's also a very, very famous story. I was also aware of the fact that

Susan Twist as Susan Triad: not all she seemed.

There is indeed always a Twist at the end.

Sutekh looked rather different first time around.

> **How deliberate is Susan Twist's surname? I literally had it in mind casting her**

the Tom Baker years were sold abroad by... was it Lionheart? [Yes – Ed] So that those were the years that have been seen in America. So it wasn't completely unknown to an American audience.

And partly, as a fan, we have an increased budget and also I thought Sutekh deserved an increased budget. I thought of everything we're bringing back now, he's gonna be a huge, great big jackal. Let's be honest, Sutekh changed shape to about three forms in "Pyramids Of Mars". That first apparition that appears in the TARDIS is *nothing* like the one that appears at the end. So it's completely unashamedly changing what he looks like again, stripped of Egyptian paraphernalia, which in *Tales Of The TARDIS* is dismissed as cultural appropriation.

It's just time to get a great big old villain back. I think they do have a weight and a longevity. The fact that Sutekh returns means we can spin off that *Tales Of The TARDIS* to do an extra one. That's actually where *Tales Of The TARDIS* came from. We did that first. Episodes seven and eight were written because we created that TARDIS.

Then I said, "Look, we can introduce 'Pyramids Of Mars' by using that TARDIS and shooting with Ncuti and Miilie." And after that, a year and a half ago, that's when I went, "Hang on. We could use that set to do other *Tales Of The TARDIS*." So you're seeing everything – it's very timey-wimey – in reverse order.

Speaking of timey-wimey, there's a gap in "The Devil's Chord" that implies six months have passed since Ruby met the Doctor.

No, that's meant to be... that's complicated. I mean, I can see that no one in the audience would ever get this! I'm trying to explain how Sarah Jane is clearly from the 1970s and yet in "Pyramids Of Mars" she says she's from the 1980s. So I'm trying to establish some sort of temporal drift as you go into the TARDIS. There's not a six-month gap there. No one else but a *Doctor Who* discourse would ever think six months had passed.

So everything's still brand new to Ruby. The next thing, they land on an alien planet, it's brand new to her. It's me trying to explain that you drift in time relative to where you left from, that's the only reason. I do believe Sarah Jane came from the 1970s, I don't think she came from the 1980s at all.

I have very little time for UNIT dating. I think those things went out in the year that they went out. It's not set in the future, the Jon Pertwee seasons, no way is that the future. So there's a kind of temporal drift going on. That's the reason why he asks where she's from. He's →

PICTURES: © BBC, BBC STUDIOS, JAMES PARDON

Ruby visits a ruined 2024 in "The Devil's Chord".

Daughter and mothers reunited at last.

Sarah visited a ruined 1980 in "Pyramids of Mars".

The TARDIS explodes in "The Star Beast".

kind of triangulating where she *feels* like. She *feels* time shifted in the way that Sarah Jane feels like after all that much travel in the TARDIS – it's like a decade has passed for her, but it clearly hasn't. So there's a kind of temporal drift at work there.

In 2005 you said "No Zog aliens from the planet Zog". Was that the same mindset this time?

That's always my attitude towards *Doctor Who* – even with the Chuldur [the aliens in "Rogue"]. I think the Chuldur are a good example because they're cosplaying. I love that story. So you get what they're doing.

What that means is, I would never start with scene one, a Chuldur standing against a bird-like sky saying, "Now we will invade planet Earth!" I think that's the way to turn off [viewers], whereas actually we open that episode on a dance in the Regency era and with a good murder. That's always good.

But then after the titles the Doctor and Ruby are dancing, and it's *Bridgerton*, and you're straight into it. If anything, maybe we're a bit light on aliens this year. I think we can bring some more of them back next year – we've got some great stuff, some great robots. There's a great enemy, there's an episode that's full of aliens. I think we can tilt a little bit back towards the aliens a bit.

How much of an impact do you think that Sutekh clutching on to the TARDIS has had on the Doctor's travels?

It would be marvellous to go back through the entire archive since 1975 and drop Susan Twist into every story! If I had ultimate power I would literally do that, I'm not kidding. I would do that. I love that, because she *was* there. She's been popping up on every single planet. "Planet Of Evil", can you imagine? She was there, in the background somewhere. "The Talons Of Weng-Chiang", she was there. Susan Twist is walking up and down that riverbank [of the Thames] somewhere. I love her.

I *absolutely* don't want to create any sort of mythology in which it is said that Sutekh was *guiding* the TARDIS for all those years. I just don't believe that at all. I think it needed the explosion that was big enough at the end of "The Star Beast", when the TARDIS kind of goes mad and blows up, that's kind of what woke Sutekh up.

I genuinely think he was clinging to the TARDIS with his plan. He had that plan all along to create those Susan Twist avatars. So that's been going on ever since 1975, but I don't think Sutekh ever *guided* the TARDIS.

It took until him coming across Ruby's mother, with time itself being completely unknown to him, for him to wake. There was something kind of omniscient riding the TARDIS and suddenly that stopped when he saw her – which was a woman of no significance. It's just the fact that she was so insignificant gave her significance.

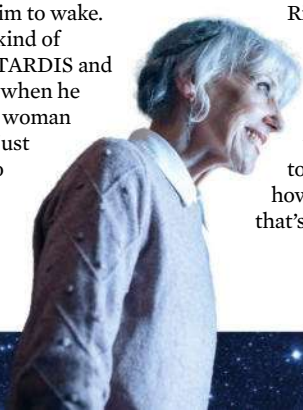
"The only thing that annoys me is when people say that we leak things deliberately"

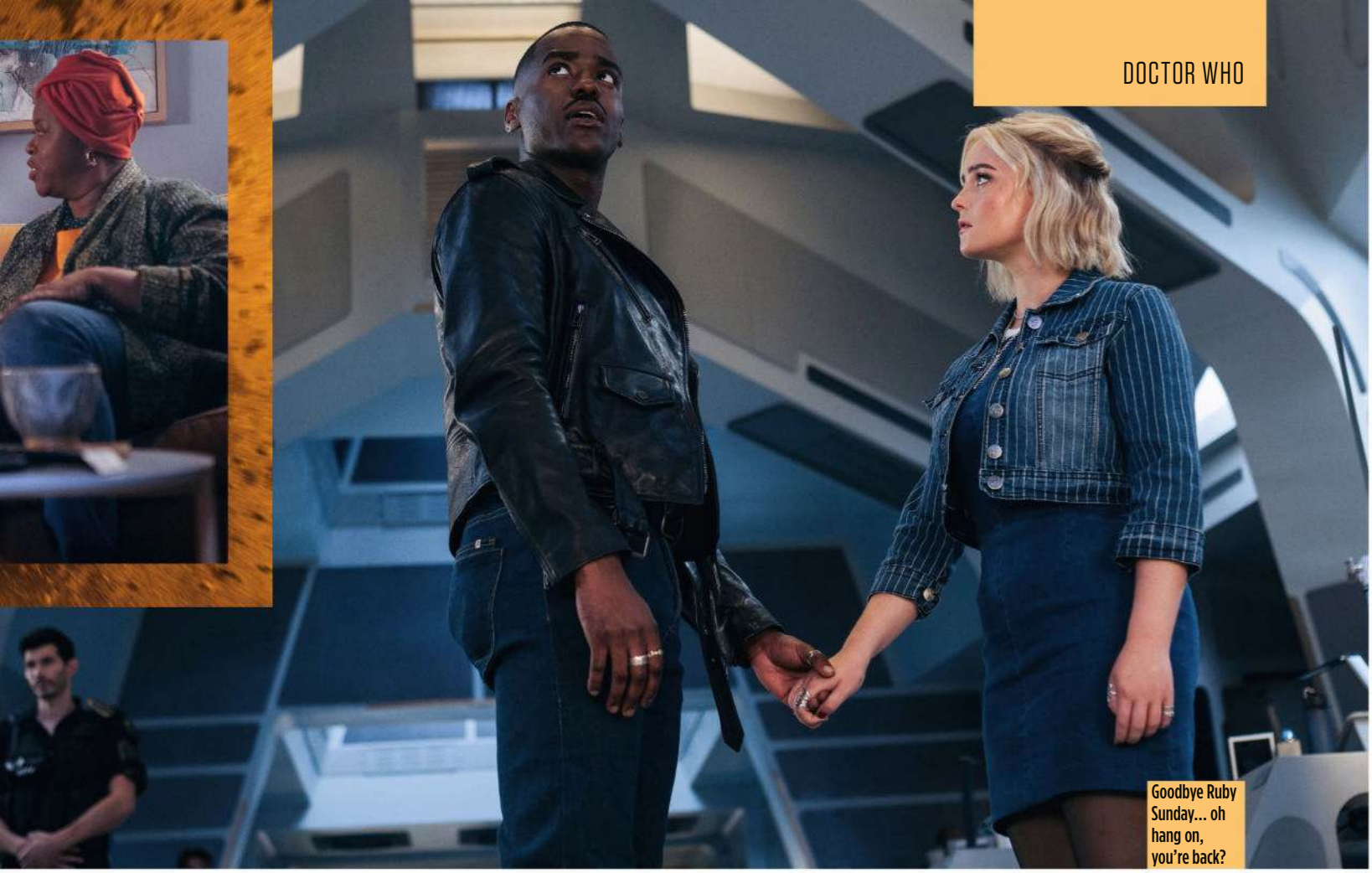
I love that, I'm so proud of that. A lot of the ending of Ruby's mother is my reaction to what they did with *The Last Jedi* – that middle film, directed by Rian Johnson. They said that Daisy Ridley's Rey was no one, was not special and said anyone could be a Jedi. It ends on that brilliant image of a little kid playing, and they've got the Force.

They then changed their mind in the next film – along came JJ Abrams, who is brilliant, but says, actually, for Rey to have the Force, she's going to be the Emperor's daughter. I preferred the middle film that said, "Actually, you could be the most ordinary person in the world and capable of possessing the Force."

So that Ruby story was my reaction to that, where you think Ruby's mother is going to be Sutekh or a Time God, or Susan Foreman, or a version of Ruby from the future, or the Rani or River Song, and actually it turns out to be a 15-year-old Manchester girl who's saving a baby from an unsafe house.

That's more powerful than any cosmic force in the universe. So I loved writing that. I was very much on a *mission* to write that, because I think that that's how *my* science fiction world works. I think that's a good story, and I think that should be





Goodbye Ruby Sunday... oh hang on, you're back?

said at every level: Manchester girl sitting in their bedroom, watching the television, you are as important as any god or emperor or Time Lord. [Bangs desk] Lesson over!

Some might say they were surprised it was resolved at all...

I promised answers. It was always going to be resolved. I just get annoyed when things like that go on. Oh my god, can you imagine if this series had ended with, "Oh, let's find out next year who your mother is." I would've thrown something at the screen. Some shows that works for, but personally *I* would only ever do a story like that if it wraps up.

It's a shame that Ruby's departure is slightly ruined by knowing she's going to return.

It's a shame, yes, yes, yes. There's nothing we can do. We see these things in public. Our stories leak. The only thing that annoys me is when people say that we leak things deliberately, which we would *never* do to an actor's career or standing or reputation. It's monstrous when people claim that.

If only we could've kept that secret. I still think a lot of people don't follow these stories. I think a lot of people watched Ruby leave heartbroken and amazed that that's happened, and will be delighted when she turns up again, and she comes back with such terrific stories. It's going to be great.

Even though we know she's returning, we were willing her not to go.

Mrs Flood, and Romana in "The Ribos Operation".

She hasn't even met her father. The Doctor's not going to sit and wait, like, "Go meet William and have a chat." Off-stage there will be tempestuous moments with Louise.

I love that image of women at the end. I love the fact that Ruby stands there with her birth mother, her mother and grandmother, and they put their arms around her and watch the TARDIS disappear. A safer life and a better life, but a richer life, I love that. And then they've got Anita Dobson standing on their roof! Honestly, next year... I won't go into details, but I will say there's a cracking bit of dialogue between Anita Dobson and Millie Gibson. It's lovely. There's lots to come.

That final scene with Anita Dobson has had many people speculating again.

Possibly the campest ending to a television programme ever transmitted! Isn't that ending brilliant? I love that ending.

There's the London Eye and the bridge, Big Ben, everything's in the background. It's the most touristy London you've ever seen. I'm not quite sure where it means that flat is located, it's on some faultline that makes London compress into a single line! We cheered when we saw that. They did that on purpose, that's great effects.

She had us all roaring with laughter at that scene, she is *so* brilliant. I promise you next year, great answers to that, great solutions.

Probably because she's wearing white fur, people are going to think she's [Time Lord companion] Romana, aren't they?

Did you do that on purpose?

I will leave that echoing in the pages of *SFX*. I promise you answers to that. Again, that's gonna be next year. I cannot tell you how much joy and fun we had with this story. Anita Dobson – I'm laughing out loud! – Anita Dobson's got the *best stuff ever* coming up. Glorious.

Doctor Who is on BBC iPlayer (UK) and Disney+ (globally).

STOCK ELEMENTS: ROC CANALS, SUNNY, ISTOCK/GETTY

Designing

STAR TREK: DISCOVERY

TRIPS INTO *TREK* HISTORY PROVIDE SOMETHING OLD AND SOMETHING NEW FOR *STAR TREK: DISCOVERY* COSTUME DESIGNER ANTHONY TRAN

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

Tran's renderings for the Breen costume.

THE BREEN

I really studied that *Deep Space Nine* costume. Luckily, through the magic of Google, there was a Christie's auction years back and they had really detailed photos of the original costumes. I sat with those for a bit because the undertaking for that felt so huge, because those costumes are so specific. That helmet is very specific, the diagonal plating is very specific – so you feel like, how am I going to update this where it still feels exactly like what it is?

I knew I wanted to slim it down – that's just the language of *Discovery*. Then, in the script, obviously fleshing out the idea of this refrigeration suit – they were in this gelatinous situation, but the refrigeration suit was keeping them in body form.

The original costume had this backpack, which I'm sure was just because they needed to hide the lighting element in the helmet. But for me, that became the genesis of the cooling technology. If you look at the backpack, it's pretty similar in terms of the style lines, but we made it more angular and slimmed it down.

There's tubing that goes into the helmet, there's tubing that goes around the helmet. There's also tubing woven all around the costume. That was inspired by cooling suits in spacesuits – if you look at those, there's a bunch of tubes that are woven and so we wove them on the diagonal, because for me that was the aesthetic language of the Breen.

Then we use those similar plates, the shoulder pauldrons. Everything is very similar in terms of the actual style lines, the silhouette has just changed because we've slimmed it down so much and made it feel more tactical and hard, a more rough and tough military feel.

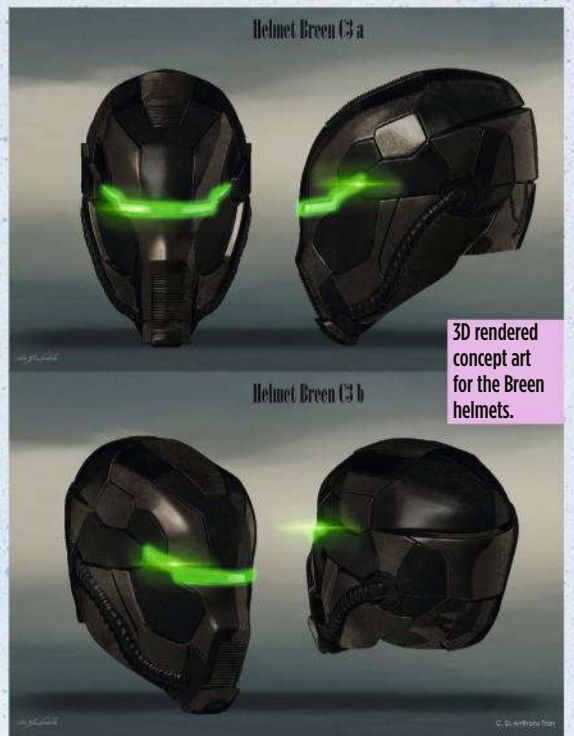
But if you look at, like, the grilles in front of the helmets, two tubes on the side, everything is very much referenced. Even with the print on their bandolier, there's this crosshatch patch texture. It's the exact same texture as the original Breen costumes. We 3D-printed it so our details look finer, but the genesis of everything really was those *Deep Space Nine* costumes.

The fabric was a three-step process. It was faux leather. We needed a lot of it and they unevenly painted on top of it – it almost looks like a '60s/'70s kaleidoscope, like a Peter Sellers movie [*I Love You, Alice B Toklas*] situation, this crazy hippy thing, and then we screenprinted on top of it. So if you look really, really closely, it's all very dimensional and it feels really battleworn with battle scars and everything, like they've really used these costumes.

Those raised plates are created with neoprene. The costume has several parts. Obviously there's the helmet: the helmet comes apart in two parts, the crown and the face. Then there's the backpack with the tubes that connect. They had a base jumpsuit, for lack of a better word – all you really see are part of the sleeve and legs. There's a vest on top of that, but a belt goes over. That's how it looks like one piece.

There's also arm braces, leg braces, boots, and all that stuff. But those are the component pieces. If you look really closely where the tubes are woven in, that's all laser-cut leather. That's kind of a hexagon and then many, many people weaving a lot of tubing. I think people cursed my name a lot – there was a *lot* of tubing. This tubing could not be bought off the rack, we literally had to sculpt and mould again, because I needed something that would stretch.

The updated Breen look for *Discovery*. Sharp!



3D rendered concept art for the Breen helmets.

A whole lot of laser-cut leather going on...

...and someone's got to put it together.

Concept art rendering for T'Rina's bridal dress.

The symbol of Ni'Var. Do pardon me, madam.

Building up the dress by layering elements.

Laser-cut leather on top of neoprene is *in*.

T'RINA'S WEDDING DRESS

I looked at Vulcan weddings in *Star Trek* canon. So we know T'Pring's in the original series and in *Strange New Worlds*, and then there was T'Pol in *Enterprise*. For people who are invested in *Trek*, it becomes about, what is the culture and what is the root DNA? What does a traditional costume look like if you're a Vulcan, what does a traditional costume look like if you're a Kelpien, and making sure that identity is pretty clear.

The T'Pring costumes are silver, and have this very distinct linear raised design on them. Wedding dresses are traditionally made of lace, so I was like, "What is the 32nd century version of lace?" Using those linear lines, we used laser-cut leather that we also put on top of neoprene to create this raised dimensional effect. It was built around the symbol of Ni'Var that's on her chest. So using those lines and playing with it, but those lines on the body are really influenced by those T'Pring costumes.

Her veil is inspired by T'Pol; if you look at the costume from *Enterprise* it sits on the back of her head. So we did the same thing with our version, only I wanted to create this crazy structural, architectural, really dramatic costume. So the veil goes into this drape train. That costume was also a little bit inspired by Princess Grace of Monaco's wedding dress in the '50s – if you look at the silhouette of it, they're fairly similar.

The dress is actually raffia, like in basket weaving. So the base texture of the fabric, that diamond texture, it's woven-together raffia. The veil structure with silver brocade, we then put three layers of different gold foils on top, because for me it's all about creating depth. To buy gold fabric is very, very easy but it looks very, very flat and very, very cheesy. So you take silver and then put different sections of gold where it looks like gold but if you get it up close, it reads more dimensional.

Raffia, gold foils and silver brocade, oh my!

Doug Jones shows off Saru's wedding togs.

And here's the original render for the design.

SARU'S WEDDING OUTFIT

We looked at the Kelpiens, the Kelpien colour palette, and then the idea of hybridising that with Vulcan so that the strong shoulder element comes into play. This costume is mohair velvet that we shaved down a little bit and we dyed, it's custom. It looks like a '70s carpet when you first see it. Then we applied gold foil on top of it, and the splotchy effect that felt otherworldly. Then all those sculpted-out ribbed plates were inspired by one of the earlier Kelpien *Discovery* costumes. The costume was extremely heavy, I think it was 40 pounds – he's such a trouper, Doug Jones. He said to me, "I think this is the most beautiful thing I've ever worn." I was like, "I think you say that to every costume designer you work with, but I'll take it." The genesis was Kelpien meets Vulcan and just making him look the most regal we've seen him.

Adding sculpted plates to the base material.

Splotchy mohair: don't try this at home.

THE WEDDING PARTY

What do people in the 32nd century wear to go to a royal wedding? We had all these aliens there and then, obviously, the bulk of your background are going to be humans, but how do you make them look otherworldly? So there's that green costume with all the gems covering his face that we artfully arranged so he could see out of it, but you can't see him – with this kind of shell-like structure.

There's the bronze costume that's inspired by royal weddings – this crazy fascinator, but the idea of making that mesh and flipping it forward on her head and skewing that. Creating things that were really, really impactful – you only see them for a blip if you even see them at all, so creating things that structurally read as very, very grand even if you never see the details.

It was an intensive amount of work. The wedding was in the original script. The coda was the only thing we reshot once we knew we weren't coming back. It was kind of funny to me, because it really felt like a natural ending, that wedding, but that was just how the season ended. We came back later for the coda. We had another month before we shot the coda while we were prepping the costumes.

Once we knew what we were doing with the Breen, we moved on to the wedding – that was probably when we were shooting episode five. So the design process of that was relatively early. A lot of those wedding costumes were, for us, just fun things to make that people really enjoyed doing. They were a break from weaving tubes, and from covering neoprene with leather. It became a thing that people were steadily working on throughout the season.

The lead time on those was probably six months. The wedding dress all in all took a month and a half to make on its own, just because it was so detailed, and the way it had to be mapped out onto Tara [Rosling]'s body was so specific. Saru's costume was probably four weeks. But you're doing that in addition to doing 16 other episodes at the same time. So with TV it never stops!

Star Trek: Discovery is on Paramount+ and releasing on Blu-ray and DVD in August.

"I promised myself I wasn't going to cry..."

Some of the various lifeforms at the wedding.

Rendered concept art for the various delegates.

Kids today with their fashions, eh? Wild.

Brought THE SFX AUTHOR INTERVIEW To Book

MOIRA BUFFINI

Late show: the acclaimed dramatist tells us why she's written a novel

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by John Biltcliffe

WHEN SHE FIRST SAT DOWN TO WRITE *Songlight*, her story of a dystopian future where telepaths are feared and hunted, Moira Buffini had little idea she was about to craft her debut novel. A hugely successful dramatist, her initial instinct was to treat the story as an on-spec project for cinema or TV.

"I sat down and started to write the screenplay, and realised almost immediately that I couldn't, that there was just too much about this world that I didn't know," says Buffini. She decided to write "from inside the character" as "a kind of interior monologue" so she could better understand the fictional world she was trying to describe. "Almost by the end of the first page of this, I thought, 'This is a book.'"

And not just any old book, but a remarkable novel. The opening instalment of a trilogy, *Songlight* begins in the claustrophobic environs of Northaven, a village where Elsa makes a modest living by fishing. Moving through a religious and patriarchal society, she has a dangerous secret: she has the power of "songlight", a sixth sense that enables her to communicate with another young woman, Kaira, in a city far away. Together, the two may just change the world.

It's a story Buffini had wanted to write for a long time. Indeed, its deepest roots can be traced back to reading John Wyndham's *The Chrysalids*, a far-future-set novel of telepaths and fundamentalism, as a teenager. Drawn to "the retro-futureness" of science fiction written in the middle of the 20th century, the sense that "it's the 1940s, but it's thousands of years hence", she was captivated.

HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL

"It really got under my skin, just the fact that it was a post-apocalyptic novel, and a Cold War novel," she recalls. At a time when a nuclear exchange between the USA and the USSR seemed an all-too real possibility, she joined CND.

Bleak – except, as Buffini points out, in a strange way there's something inherently optimistic about post-apocalyptic fiction. "I've always felt it's quite hopeful," she says, "because in a weird way you're writing about a planet in recovery rather than a planet spiralling towards whatever different shade of horror it might be – whether it's nuclear armageddon, as when I was a teenager, or global heating as it is now."

Along with the "politically so astute and so imaginative" Ursula K Le Guin, another huge influence was Margaret Atwood, and Buffini also finds light in the theocratic nightmare of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Specifically, in the way the novel closes with a transcript drawn from a historical conference taking place years later and looking back. "What that kind of does is says, 'This, too, will pass', if you like. The dreadful situation of the women in that story passes."

When the young Buffini wasn't reading, she was cutting her teeth as a writer. Every year at her school, there was an arts festival. One year, nobody wanted to write a new play for the event. Buffini volunteered and suddenly, "Everybody wants to be in my play, and they all like me!" By the time she got to the fifth form (year 11 in new money), she was "hooked" on writing. She joined the National Youth Theatre, then studied English and drama at Goldsmiths.

STATE OF INDEPENDENCE

Throughout, her Irish mother – a widow and single parent – was hugely supportive. "She is one of my constant inspirations," Buffini says, "[for showing me] that women can do anything, just by living her life. She taught me that, yeah, women can use power tools. Because she had to do everything herself, and she just did. If there was something she didn't know how to do, she'd just read the book on it."

Similarly independent, Buffini began putting on "plays on the [Edinburgh] Fringe and in little rooms above pubs". One of these plays, *Jordan* (1992), co-written with Anna Reynolds, garnered a Writers' Guild Award.

Subsequently, Buffini's plays have been performed at the National Theatre. In the middle of the last decade, she collaborated with Damon Albarn on the Lewis Carroll-inspired musical *Wonder.land*. He was "a genius", she says, but, "Writing songs, I learned, is really hard." Her screenplays include the Neil Jordan-directed vampire tale *Byzantium* (2012), adapted from her own play, *A Vampire Story*, and *The Dig* (2021), an archaeological drama for Netflix that delicately explored English mysticism. Her TV series *Harlots*, starring Samantha Morton, gave voice to sex workers in 18th century London.

None of this prepared her for the solitude of writing a novel. Indeed, Buffini says she's intensely missed having collaborators, to the extent of employing her niece as a "weekly reader" and "plot therapist", someone to talk with as she continues the trilogy. Still, it's all been worth it. "I'm a debut novelist," she says, bursting out laughing at the absurdity of this notion. "To be a debut novelist in your fifties is great!"

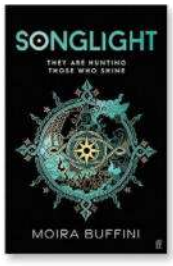
Songlight is published by Faber & Faber on 29 August.

BIODATA

From **Cheshire**

Greatest Hits
Buffini's screenplay credits include *Tamara Drewe* (2010) and *Jane Eyre* (2011). Her plays are published by Faber.

Random Fact
At the start of the '90s, Buffini spent some time working as a drama teacher in Holloway prison.



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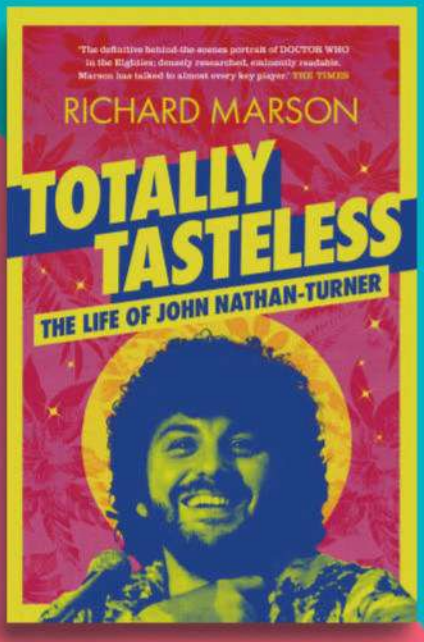
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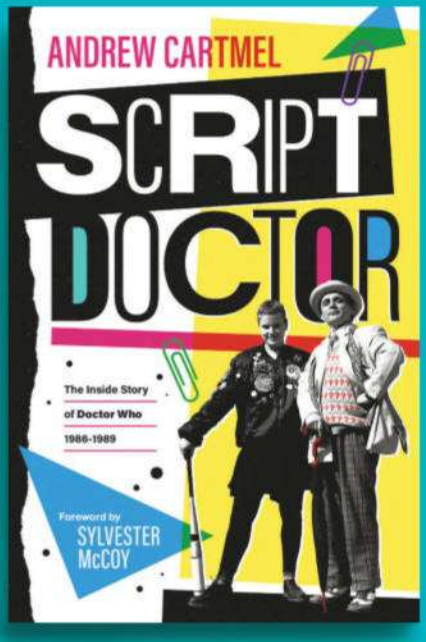

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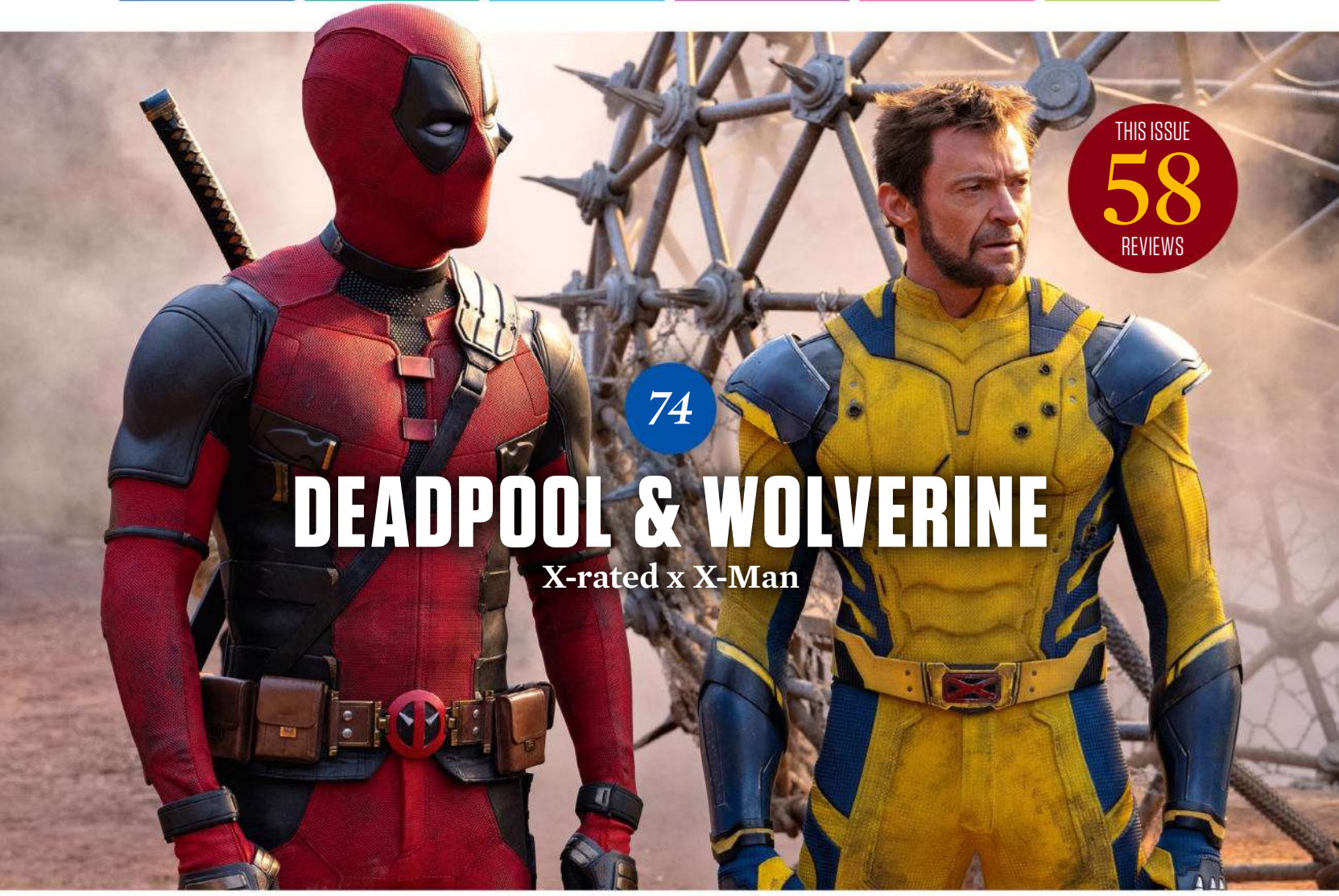

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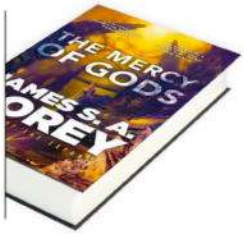

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THE MERCY OF GODS

→ New space opera from "James SA Corey", the writing team behind *The Expanse*.

→ RATINGS EXPLAINED ★★★★★ SUPERB ★★★★☆ GOOD ★★★☆☆ AVERAGE ★★☆☆☆ POOR ★☆☆☆☆ TERRIBLE

"So how do you deal with crotch rot?" "Embrace it".

DEADPOOL & WOLVERINE

The Merc with a Mate

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 128 minutes

Director **Shawn Levy**

Cast **Ryan Reynolds, Hugh Jackman, Emma Corrin, Rob Delaney**

"Welcome to the MCU, you're joining at a bit of a low point," says Ryan Reynolds's wise-cracking Wade Wilson to Hugh Jackman's dourer-than-usual Logan partway through *Deadpool & Wolverine*.

It's a big laugh, the sort of cheeky metafictional gag that these movies are famous for, but it's also one that cuts surprisingly close to the bone. Even the most die-hard fans of Marvel's world-conquering mega-franchise would struggle to deny that things have felt a little shaky in the House of Feige of late.

Deadpool & Wolverine doesn't exactly point the way forward for the MCU – like last year's *Guardians Of The Galaxy Vol 3*, it's a film that depends on the audience knowing and loving these characters, rather than giving us something new.

But it's the funniest film in the series by quite some margin, and blessed with that rarest of commodities in the MCU. No, not an Infinity Stone: a decent villain for once.

Wade Wilson has given up the hero game, having been rejected by the Avengers. Newly single and working in a car dealership, the former Merc with a Mouth is at a low point until he discovers that his universe is to be deleted by the timeline-policing TVA – a direct result of the death of Wolverine in 2017's *Logan*.

> **"It's the funniest film in the series by quite some margin"**

In order to prevent this, he goes on a reality-hopping odyssey to find a replacement Wolverine variant, but quickly falls foul of evil mutant Cassandra Nova (Emma Corrin), whose plans threaten the entire multiverse.

Both Corrin and Jackman are superb, with the latter playing an even more broken version of Wolverine than he did in *Logan*. The film is ruthlessly committed to getting a laugh whenever possible, but Jackman approaches it all with straight-faced sincerity. Corrin, meanwhile, is menacing as Nova – an Omega Level mutant who feels like a genuine threat, despite our two heroes' invulnerable nature.

Where the film comes a little undone is in its middle act, a lengthy homage to Fox's defunct Marvel projects (of which the *Deadpool* franchise itself was one) that's either fan-pleasing and fun, or exclusionary and self-indulgent, depending on how invested you are in this stuff.

Some of the many cameos will draw cheers from the faithful, but the constant callbacks do eventually grow wearying.

For the most part though, this is exactly the sort of idiosyncratic mix of gags, extreme violence, inventive swearing and dewy-eyed sincerity that fans are looking for from a *Deadpool* movie. In short, it's a crowd-pleaser for a very specific crowd – and they will love it.

Will Salmon

i The pup playing Dogpool is Peggy, a Pug/Chinese Crested mix who won last year's Britain's Ugliest Dog contest.

DESPICABLE ME 4

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

U | 94 minutes

Director **Chris Renaud**

Cast **Steve Carell, Pierre Coffin, Will Ferrell, Joey King**

Despite the title, this is effectively the sixth *Despicable Me* film (counting two Minions-led prequels), and the franchise is very much on autopilot now. This new film can't even manage to tell a feature-length story. Instead, it has a handful of different stories – none much good – which cut across each other like a sketch show.

After being threatened by a vengeful villain (a French-accented Will Ferrell, on weak form), reformed villain Gru, plus his wife, daughters and a new baby boy, are given a new home and new identities.

In one thread, a teenage girl finds out who Gru is and blackmails him into carrying out a heist at his old villain school. Meanwhile, some Minions get turned into Fantastic Four types – an idea which sounds like it has potential, but they were funnier when they were plain old Minions. Now and again, the film remembers that Ferrell's baddie is still hunting for Gru, but few viewers will care much about that.

Amid the recycled, half-hearted comedy, the best gags involve Gru's Jekyll/Hyde baby, who loves his mum but has a glowering contempt for his supervillain dad, and a sublime scene where a cat and a girl synch their moves to ace a *Dance Dance Revolution*-type game. Sadly, these moments amount to maybe a minute's worth of laughs.

Andrew Osmond

SLEEP

★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 95 minutes

Director **Jason Yu**

Cast **Lee Sun-kyun, Jung Yu-mi, Kim Gook-hee, Yoon Kyung-ho**

As the very best storytellers know, comedy and horror can make for wonderful bedfellows. And Jason Yu's exceptional directorial debut is able to switch between funny and frightening and back again in delightful fashion.

A couple, played by *Parasite*'s Lee Sun-kyun and Jung Yu-mi, are peacefully slumbering in their small apartment when they hear an intruder, and have to leap out of bed to figure out who or what has disturbed their sleep. This simple premise spins out into increasingly unhinged territory as night after night a malevolent presence makes itself known through sound.

It's a taut and zippily plotted script (by the director himself), whose cleverness slowly reveals itself as innocuous-seeming details from the first act turn out to be key to unlocking its central mystery.

And beyond the architectural building blocks of the plot, the relationship between the couple is tenderly realised. The two leads have exquisite chemistry and deliver nuanced performances in portraying this loving partnership, making their home feel like a sacred space worth fighting for.

In its conclusion, the film goes wild, bordering on becoming overly farcical, but thanks to Yu's mastery of tone, there's always much joy to be had in the midst of the terrifying chaos.

Leila Latif

TUESDAY

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 19 AUGUST

15 | 111 minutes

Director **Daina O Pusić**

Cast **Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Lola Petticrew, Arinzé Kene, Leah Harvey**

Death has taken many forms on-screen, from William Sadler in *Bill & Ted* to Brad Pitt in *Meet Joe Black*. In *Tuesday*, Croatian director Daina O Pusić takes the imaginative leap of depicting the Grim Reaper as a mumbling macaw which can alter its size at will, and is partial to a vape.

Voiced by Arinzé Kene, it's a weird and unsettling creation, emblematic of a film that laces its meditations on mortality with a whimsical sense of the absurd. When it comes to taking souls to the afterlife, though, it's an implacable terminator that can't be bargained with, can't be reasoned with, and absolutely will not stop until you are dead.

Kudos to Lola Petticrew's Tuesday, then, a British teen with terminal cancer who negotiates a stay of execution from her filth-encrusted visitor. That's long enough to tell the bird a joke, give it a wash, and spend some precious last moments with her mother, an American in London who's living in denial regarding her daughter's imminent demise.

The battle of wills that follows between feisty Zora (Julia Louis-Dreyfus) and this feathered Death takes some outlandish turns, which Pusić struggles to realise convincingly with her limited resources.

However, that doesn't stop *Tuesday* being a striking and one of a kind film that's anything but bird-brained.

Mark Samuels

SKY PEALS

★★★½☆

RELEASED 9 AUGUST

12A | 91 minutes

Director **Moin Hussain**

Cast **Faraz Ayub, Natalie Gavin, Claire Rushbrook, Simon Nagra**

More of a slipstream-y character study than out-and-out sci-fi, this low-key British indie – a promising debut for writer/director Moin Hussain – puts the alien into alienation.

Sky Peals is the oddly surreal name of a British motorway services, where the withdrawn Adam (Faraz Ayub) works for a burger franchise. After receiving an answerphone message from the father who walked out on him 20 years ago, Adam later learns that he was found dead in his vehicle in the services car park. Then that dad was adopted, and had spoken of "not being human".

Mental health issues seem the most likely explanation, but with Adam – who seems so socially awkward that he may well be "on the spectrum" – experiencing lost time incidents, maybe there's something in it?

Using SF concepts as a way to metaphorically explore how some people of mixed-race heritage struggle to find a sense of belonging, it's a film whose gloomy vibes and muted ambiguity are a minority taste. However, Ayub impresses as the painfully shy Adam (a scene where he reaches out to a guy repairing a hand-dryer inspires wince-inducing empathy). And Hussain and his DoP make a decent fist of the challenge of rendering a bog-standard Welcome Break eerily otherworldly, supported by Sarah Davachi's mournful ambient score. **Ian Berriman**

CUCKOO

★★★½☆

RELEASED 23 AUGUST

15 | 103 minutes

Director **Tilman Singer**

Cast **Hunter Schafer, Dan Stevens, Jessica Henwick, Marton Csokas**

It's clearly the moment for mood-over-movement horror thrillers, as *Luz* writer/director Tilman Singer steps into the ring with this latest example: eerie, stylish, but sometimes overly disjointed.

Cuckoo finds Hunter Schafer's gloomy, grieving Gretchen accompanying her father (Márton Csókás), stepmother (Jennifer Henwick) and non-vocal stepsister (Mila Lieu) on a trip to help expand the isolated Bavarian Alps resort run by Herr Köni (Dan Stevens, in supremely charming/creepy mode).

Gretchen is already uncomfortable, having recently lost her mother, and things only get more complicated when weird events start to occur. Guests show up half-dressed and vomiting in the resort's reception. A strange blonde-haired woman haunts the place, and a freakish signal keeps affecting Gretchen's thoughts, causing her to feel like she's repeating small fragments in time.

Schafer offers a committed, vanity-free performance, while Singer amps up the mood, giving the film a timeless look (there are smartphones, but most of the other tech screams '80s). Juddery editing keeps you off guard.

Tied to an unsettling soundscape, it mostly works, and a healthy dollop of dark humour keeps things from slipping into Garth Marenghi territory. **James White**

"Look, I've drawn Richard Osman!" "Cool!"

HAROLD AND THE PURPLE CRAYON

Drawing a blank

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

PG | 90 minutes

Directors **Carlos Saldanha**

Cast **Zachary Levi, Zooey Deschanel, Lil Rel Howery, Jemaine Clement**

***Big* meets *Shazam!* in this** charmless fantasy, ostensibly based on a classic children's book from 1955, but really just a superhero flick without the capes.

Written by Crockett Johnson, the original *Harold* told of an imaginative romper-suited infant who uses a magical drawing implement to concoct a world of adventure and enchantment. In this version, though, he's a full-grown adult in existential crisis, determined – like Barbie before him – to cross into the real world and find who birthed him.

Thanks to his ever-present wax stylus, Harold (Zachary Levi) can conjure up anything from a three-wheeled motor-trike to a propeller-powered aeroplane. A satisfying plot, alas, is beyond both him and co-writers David Guion and Michael Handelman, whose only contribution of note is to invent a librarian (Jemaine Clement) intent on turning his Crayola to nefarious ends.

A friend in need takes the appealing shape of Zooey Deschanel's Terri, a single mom with a nerdy son (Benjamin Bottani) and a gift for tinkling the ivories. Romance, though, is off the cards for Levi's boisterous man-child, whose ability to generate living beings out of the ether conveniently means neither he nor director Carlos Saldanha (*Ice Age*, *Robots*) have to grapple with procreation's nuts and bolts.

Two of those beings take on amusingly human form in this live-action debut for Saldanha, which is at its strongest wherever it cleaves closest to Johnson's timeless text. By the time the film reaches its frenetic, effects-bloated finale, though, its inspiration is a distant memory. **Neil Smith**

i Crockett Johnson was also known for his mathematical paintings inspired by geometrical principles.

I SAW THE TV GLOW

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 100 minutes

Director **Jane Schoenbrun**

Cast **Justice Smith, Brigette Lundy-Paine, Helena Howard, Lindsey Jordan**

Hey, remember *The Pink Opaque*, that YA show where Isabel and Tara communicated via the psychic plane to battle moon-faced Big Bad Mr Melancholy? Got a favourite episode? "Welcome To The Scar Wash"? "Escape From The Midnight Owl"? What about that shocking season five finale?

You probably don't, because it didn't actually exist. However, if you loved *Buffy* (whose Amber Benson cameos here), "Josh Pemberton"'s fictional TV series should set bells ringing.

This is a film of two halves, both equally impressive. Opening by showing how the awkward Owen (Justice Smith) befriended schoolmate Maddy (Brigette Lundy-Paine), it explores something most *SFX* readers can readily understand: how a TV show can help make sense of confusing feelings, or cement new friendships.

Then Maddy vanishes, returning 10 years later with a wild theory... Though the film invites readings through a queer lens (director Jane Schoenbrun is trans), it's a pivot point with resonance for *anyone* who's ever felt they're not living their best life, or that time is somehow accelerating (so anyone over 30).

Awash with the neon colours of funfairs and arcades, this is a film which manages to render even a swathe of exposition visually ravishing, and delivers both heartwarming nostalgia and haunting chills. **Ian Berriman**

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"Is that a lightsaber or..." "Yes. Yes it is."

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

- **Swiss army knife-esque pocket droid Pip uses a new gadget.**
- **Someone rolls their eyes (literally or figuratively) at Yord Fandar.**

- **Rodenty tracker Bazil picks up the scent of a hero or villain.**
- **An actor appears digitally de-aged in flashback.**
- **Jedi Master Vernestra Rwoh's lightsaber turns into a light whip.**
- **We see a scene we've seen before from a different perspective.**

THE ACOLYTE Season One

Having a High old time

★★★☆☆

UK/US: **Disney+, streaming now**

Showrunner **Leslye Headland**

Cast **Amandla Stenberg, Lee Jung-jae, Dafne Keen, Manny Jacinto**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 ***The Acolyte* was** supposed to be different. In the run-up to launch, the Lucasfilm publicity machine made a big deal of the fact that it's a detective mystery, sympathetic to disciples of the Dark Side, and an interstellar riff on *Rashomon*, telling its story from multiple points of view. All of these things are undeniably – if, at times, marginally – true, yet *The Acolyte* is also *Star Wars* as we've seen it many times before.

Showrunner Leslye Headland originally pitched the series (set in the High Republic era, a century before *The Phantom Menace*) as "*Kill Bill* meets *Frozen*", and it doesn't take long to understand why. The first episode opens with a spectacular wuxia-inspired duel, in which masked assassin Mae (Amandla Stenberg) battles Jedi Master Indara (Carrie-Anne Moss) in a crowded cantina. We soon learn that Mae has an estranged identical twin sister, Osha (also Stenberg), who – like Elsa in the Disney movie – struggles to come to terms with her powers. Force-sensitive twins? In *Star Wars*? Who'd have thought it?

Unfortunately, *The Acolyte* – and the Jedi's subsequent hunt for Mae and her master – rarely delivers on that early promise. As co-creator of the ingenious *Russian Doll*, Headland is arguably *The Acolyte*'s star attraction, but here any potential storytelling flair is subsumed into an amorphous blob of transferrable *Star Wars* Content™.

> **"Force-sensitive twins? Who'd have thought it?"**

Effort has clearly been made to give the Jedi distinct personalities – the enthusiastic Jecki (Dafne Keen), the by-the-book Yord (Charlie Barnett) – but their natty new/old uniforms can't mask the fact that, in a time of comparative peace, the Order is rather dull. Indeed, if you're going to riff on anything from George Lucas's prequels, that stilted "Yes, my young Padawan" way of talking seems an odd place to start.

That said, fifth instalment "Night" stands among *Star Wars*' best TV episodes ever. As the mysterious villain embarks on a brutally inventive killing spree, the action meshes seamlessly with backstory and wider questions about the morality of the Jedi. In these moments the show feels bold, fresh and vital.

Alas, it's not long before the plot is once again bogged down by rehashed pieces of familiar *Star Wars* lore (as well as a few fan-baiting contradictions), dialogue copied from the movies, and characters making instantaneous life-changing decisions that make little logical – or dramatic – sense.

After eight overstretched episodes, the overriding feeling is that *The Acolyte* should have been a movie rather than a TV show. Like *Ahsoka*, its main reason to exist seems to be to explain away mythology from elsewhere in the franchise, but it's a pricey way to deal with plot points that could have been footnotes – especially as we've seen so much of *The Acolyte* before. **Richard Edwards**

i Composer John Williams rearranged his classic "Binary Sunset" theme as a solo for Stenberg, a keen violinist.

BATMAN: CAPED CRUSADER Season One

Cape Fear

★★★★☆

UK/US **Prime Video, streaming now**

Creators **Bruce Timm, Matt Reeves, JJ Abrams**

Cast **Hamish Linklater, Christina Ricci, Minnie Driver, Jason Watkins**

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 **It's over 30 years** since *Batman: The Animated Series* set the gold standard for superhero cartoons, its look inspired by both the neo-noir style of Tim Burton's 1989 movie and the authentically classic charms of the Fleischer Studios Superman adventures of the '40s.

Co-creator Bruce Timm doubles down on that retro aesthetic in this new 10-episode series. Very much a spiritual successor to *B:TAS*, it's also a more committed period piece, stripping out all traces of the 21st century – some progressive casting and character choices aside – to return the Dark Knight to his mobster-era roots.

This is essentially *Year One*, '40s style, where Batman is a newborn urban legend, his quasi-demonic appearance indebted to the crude but striking designs of the earliest comics. He's a colder, more remote figure here, a brusque bastard even to faithful butler Alfred. Alter ego Bruce Wayne may be a blue-eyed charmer but he's also a facade – we're left in no doubt that Batman's mask is the true face. As heroes go, he's just a little scary.

"Returns the Dark Knight to his mobster-era roots"

A season-long arc charts the rise and acid-splashed fall of Harvey Dent but individual episodes cherrypick the greatest rogues' gallery in comics, from Christina Ricci's flirty, screwball Catwoman to a gothic take on Clayface that homages the Universal horrors of the '40s. For all the vintage vibes there are also intriguing new takes: the Penguin is now a woman (a little gimmicky, but it works) while Harley Quinn is reimagined wholesale as an icily voiced psychological sadist. **Nick Setchfield**

"Ah c'mere ya big baby, Bats make it better."

i Original comic book Clayface Basil Karlo was named after Hollywood movie stars Basil Rathbone and Boris Karloff.

SUNNY Season One

Good grief

★★★½☆

UK/US **Apple TV+, streaming now, Wednesdays**

Creator **Katie Robbins**

Cast **Katie Robbins, Hidetoshi Nishijima, Judy Ongg, Annie the Clumsy**

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 **A comedy series** which picks up one week after a woman loses her husband and young son in a plane crash doesn't sound like a laugh riot, does it? And yes, *Sunny* does walk a tightrope between treating the death of a child as nothing more than a plot device and full-on grief porn.

The fact that it manages to pull it off – just about – is testament to Rashida Jones's nuanced performance as Suzie, a hard-drinking, hard-crying, hard-quipping mess of a mother and wife who is trying to make sense of her loss.

Based on Colin O'Sullivan's book *The Dark Manual*, what tips it into *SFX* territory is that Suzie's dead husband, Masa (Hidetoshi Nishijima), has left her with a domestic robot named Sunny (voiced by Joanna Sotomura) who is the key to finding out why his plane crashed.

Because this is set in Japan and nobody can resist a good cliché, the Yakuza are involved, led by the psychopathic Himé (played by You, also known as Yukiko Ehara, who looks weirdly like a blonde Major Kira from *Deep Space Nine*). On the trail of the truth, Suzie flits from clue to clue with the help of her mother-in-law Noriko (Judy Ongg, excellent) and her friend Mixxi (YouTube star Annie the Clumsy, who seems a bit out of her depth here).

"There's a pleasing weirdness to her adventures"

When the show works, it *really* works: mid-century modern production design, quirky music choices, Wes Anderson-esque touches. When it doesn't, it's usually because the plot is dragging. Jones is always convincing as Suzie... but she's also bloody unlikeable at times, making you wonder why Mixxi and, indeed, robot Sunny risk their lives for her. Still, there's a pleasing weirdness to her adventures that gives *Sunny* an impish charm you may not be able to resist. **Jayne Nelson**

It's always sunny in Kyoto when you have wine.

i The HQ of the company Masa worked for, Imatech, is actually the Kyoto International Conference Center.

TIME BANDITS Season One

Magical History Tour

★★★★☆

- UK/US **Apple TV+, streaming now, Wednesdays**
- Showrunners **Jemaine Clement, Iain Morris, Taika Waititi**
- Cast **Lisa Kudrow, Kal-El Tuck, Jemaine Clement, Taika Waititi**

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 **You'd have to be** brave or foolhardy to adapt something as beloved as Terry Gilliam's visually arresting cinematic flight of fancy *Time Bandits*. Taika Waititi has been called both – and worse.

The Kiwi director behind *Jojo Rabbit* and *Thor: Ragnarok* has teamed up with *Flight Of The Conchords* and *What We Do In The Shadows* collaborator Jemaine Clement and *The Inbetweeners* co-creator Iain Morris to try to convince us that the world needs a 10-part TV adaptation of the 1981 classic, starring The One With The Least Memorable Plotlines from Friends (Lisa Kudrow).

It's a hard sell. Nobody is really crying out for a *Time Bandits* that Gilliam isn't involved in, and the film is, for many, so near to perfection that any remake is doomed to failure. And worst of all: there are no dwarves! Yes, the new version has replaced time-travelling little people with people of normal height. "IT'S WOKE GONE MAD"!

Let's cut to the chase. No, *Time Bandits* the TV series is not as good as the film, but that's nothing to be ashamed of. On its own merits, it's still a hell of a lot of bizarro, surrealist fun, with some great visuals and a few surprises along the way. We don't want to spoil any of them here, but let's just say it starts referencing the film more, in surprising ways, as the series progresses. It's delayed gratification at its most effective.

As before, the setup sees Kevin, a young history buff whose parents don't quite understand him, being whisked off to different eras of the past by a bunch of hapless – and hopeless – self-proclaimed time bandits. They have stolen a map of creation – including short cuts – from the Supreme Being (Taika Waititi). It's a map that Pure Evil (Jemaine Clement) would desperately like to own, so he sends his demons in pursuit. Tonally, it's more *Horrible Histories* meets *Thor: Love And Thunder* than *Monty Python*, though there are some deliciously Pythonesque moments. Some gags soar, others flounder, but mostly it's good-natured fun, and the arc plot becomes more intriguing as the season goes.

Clement and Waititi are hugely enjoyable to watch as they camp things up mercilessly. Less convincing is Lisa Kudrow as the Bandits' ditzy leader – it's not clear if she really has no clue what she's let herself in for, or if it's a masterstroke of method acting.

It's a great-looking show too, with some excellent production design and effects, though all of the most memorable visuals do riff on the film (then again, why wouldn't they?).

So: not as good as Gilliam's movie. But, despite the knee-jerk reactions to first appearances, it's not Pure Evil either. It's just a very entertaining piece of fantasy fluff.

Jonathan Norton

ℹ Back in 2002, Gilliam worked with Hallmark on a *Time Bandits* miniseries, set to air on ABC... but it fell through.

The gang gaze in fear as Richard Osman looms.

ME Season One

★★½☆☆

- UK/US **Apple TV+, streaming now**
- Director **Barry L Levy**
- Cast **Lucian-River Chauhan, Abigail Pniowsky, Dilshad Vadsaria, Sharif Atkins**

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 **Twelve-year-**old Ben (Lucian-River Chauhan) is stressed enough about starting a new school and avoiding its vicious bully. What he *really* isn't expecting is a sudden ability to shapeshift into other people. The only person he tells is his stepsister Max (Abigail Pniowsky) – although they're still bonding, adjusting to a new blended family after their respective parents have paired up.

As Ben navigates life with a randomly changing body ("Is that my ear?" asks Max at one point, aghast), it's clear that something bigger is going on – and who is the mysterious man hunting for a missing girl?

A lot of care and attention has been paid here to family dynamics and the emotional fallout from divorce, which is a nice touch in what could have been a shallow *X-Men* rip-off. However, it's as though showrunner Barry L Levy watched *Miss Marvel* and said, "Let's do that, but with no joy!"

Consequently, there are precious few jokes. Ponderous Shakespearean voiceovers bookend each episode, sucking the life out of everything. Confusing edits between past, present and future scenes may baffle younger viewers, the visual effects look cheap, and the wider story arc is underdeveloped.

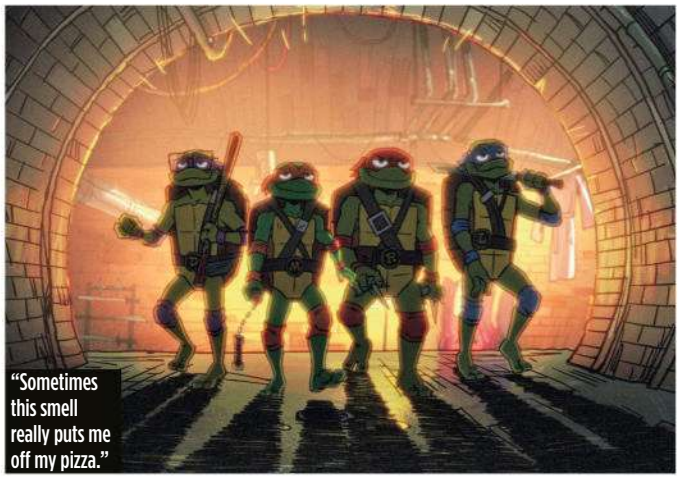
The cast try hard, and even manage to engage us at times, but otherwise *Me* is as exciting as its generic title. **Jayne Nelson**

TALES OF THE TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES Season One

Teenage Kicks

★★½☆☆

UK/US **Paramount+, from 10/9 August**
Showrunners **Chris Yost, Alan Wan**
Cast **Micah Abbey, Shamon Brown Jr, Nicolas Cantu, Brady Noon**



EPISODES 1.01-1.06 ***Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutant Mayhem*** was a hit across the (skate)board. It mutated the franchise's box office to twice its normal size and tossed a near-perfect Rotten Tomatoes score onto its critical pizza slice, with audiences acclaiming it as the best *Turtles* movie ever, dude.

This 12-part spin-off is the first animated *Turtles* to take place in the world of one of the movies, and you can see why Paramount+ wanted to keep the setup. Starting where *Mutant Mayhem* ended, with the quartet still doing hero stuff from the sewer, while also now attending high school, it should be Spider-Man times four.

That'd be appropriate, as *Mutant Mayhem* existed in the shadow of *Into The Spider-Verse*, thanks to a similar animation style. Sadly, that fizzing energy hasn't been transferred over to *Tales*, whose flat 2D, jerky feel makes it more like an internet video than the little bro to a jaw-dropping big-screen adventure. The Turtles are separated on solo adventures (weird), in a series-long battle against robo-wrangling villain Bishop (Alanna Ubach).

Voice actors Micah Abbey, Shamon Brown Jr, Nicolas Cantu, Brady Noon and Ayo Edebiri are back, though Splinter talks "in vermin", presumably because they couldn't get Jackie Chan this time. It's a money-saving shortcut that really doesn't feel right, and it's emblematic of the whole endeavour. *Tales* is intended as a bridge between *Mutant Mayhem* and the forthcoming sequel, so it could coast off fan goodwill... but it could just as easily crash and burn the entire franchise. **Sam Ashurst**

ℹ Showrunners Chris Yost and Alan Wan worked on the 2003 *Turtles* series, the 2012 reboot, and the 2018 reboot.

THE WALKING DEAD: DARYL DIXON Season One

Paris Is Burning

★★★★☆

UK **Sky Max/NOW, streaming now**
US **AMC, streaming now**
Showrunner **David Zabel**
Cast **Norman Reedus, Clémence Poésy, Louis Puech Scigliuzzi, Anne Charrier**

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **One of the problems with a very long-running show like the original *Walking Dead*** is that eventually, no matter how many twists or turns the story takes, it's going to start to look and feel a little samey. Ultimately, there's only so many times you can watch people scrabbling around the woods in Georgia without it getting stale.

That's not a problem faced by *The Walking Dead: Daryl Dixon*, which finds new ways to open up this world. Centred on Norman Reedus's taciturn hero, it relocates the action to France, with Daryl forced to fend for himself in an entirely new environment. Seeking a way back to the States, he instead gets tangled up with Isabelle (Clémence Poésy), one of a group of nuns tasked with protecting Laurent (Louis Puech Scigliuzzi), a boy believed to be a potential future messiah.

Whereas fellow spin-off *The Ones Who Live* leant on the romance between Rick and Michonne, Daryl Dixon plays out like a very strange wartime thriller – its devastated European setting and bands of guerilla fighters have more than a whiff of WW2 about them. The Parisian locales make for a refreshing backdrop to the action, and the show also has fun with the most familiar symbol of this world, the Walkers – a scene with a zombie orchestra is particularly memorable. Likewise, Clémence Poésy's soulful performance as Isabelle adds an intriguing spiritual dimension.

Where the show slightly stumbles is in its pacing. If *The Ones Who Live* raced to its end, cramming too much into a single season, *Daryl Dixon* is sluggish at times, luxuriating in a multi-season order and largely full-hour runtimes that don't always feel earned. Still, it's fun and different, and the return of a familiar face promises good things for season two. **Will Salmon**

ℹ The "rescued" painting on the wall in the Demimonde nightclub is Max Beckmann's "Dance In Baden-Baden" (1923).

SANTA SANGRE

SFX Loves

The upper hand

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1989 | 18 | 4K/Blu-ray

Director **Alejandro Jodorowsky**

Cast **Axel Jodorowsky, Blanca Guerra, Guy Stockwell, Thelma Tixou**

This gruesome, poetic, deeply Freudian horror is as perverse as you'd expect from Alejandro Jodorowsky, director of cult items *El Topo* and *The Holy Mountain*.

Though producer Claudio Argento (Dario's brother) set the ball rolling, it's not your average slasher, but an exploration of how trauma can warp a child's mind.

Jodorowky's son Axel (one of four in the cast) is Fenix, a man scarred by the primal scene to end all scenes. His mother (a trapeze artist) threw acid on the groin of her cheating husband (a knife thrower). He responded by slicing off her arms and slitting his throat. Decades later, Fenix escapes from an institution, and forms a peculiar cabaret act with mum (Blanca Guerra), acting as her arms – not only on stage, but in their domestic life. Unfortunately, Concha doesn't like it when he desires a woman, commanding "her hands" to kill...

Maintaining sympathy for the disturbed Fenix all the way to a final killer twist, it's breathtaking stuff, whose carnivalesque take on the vibrant but dangerous streets of Mexico City leave you feeling like you've been swept up in a parade, subsumed into an out-of-control conga. Surreal sequences are burned into your brain, be they larger set-pieces (such as the burial of an elephant, tipped into a dump) or fleeting hallucinations (Fenix sees himself as Christ, bombarded by chickens).

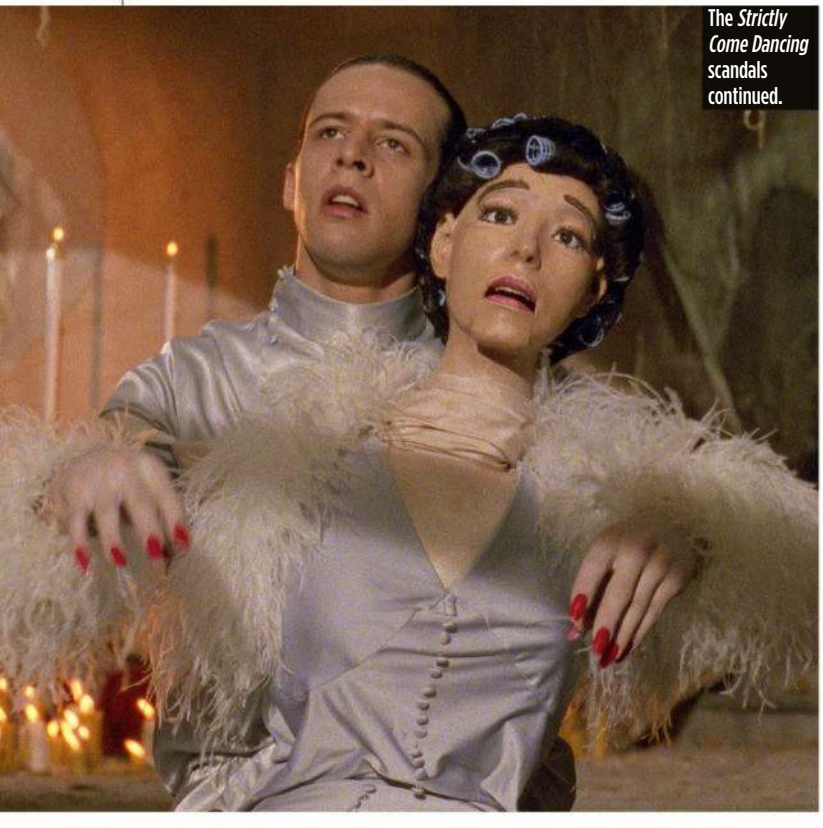
The score is extraordinary: it has conventional non-diegetic cues, but mostly the music (which includes exuberant mambo tracks by Perez Prado) exists in-universe, performed by mariachi guitarists, cranked out of barrel organs or blaring from ghettoblasters. It's as if the characters sense that their lives are so dramatic they deserve a pulsating soundtrack.

Extras The highlight is a feature-length 2011 documentary (97 minutes), with 12 talking heads. Though not flashy, it's fascinating, crammed with lurid anecdotes: Jodorowsky judging Miss Transvestite Mexico; a crazy cutting himself with a broken bottle; Guerra synchronising with her co-star by grabbing his balls!

Sizeable interviews (from 2020) quiz producers Claudio Argento (38 minutes) and Angelo Iacono (36 minutes), DOP Danielle Nannuzzi (42 minutes), and writer Roberto Leoni (29 minutes), with little overlap. So while Nannuzzi focuses on framing scenes, Iacono supplies casting tales, like how Tony Curtis campaigned to play the knife thrower. A Jodorowsky interview "on the restoration" (32 minutes) is really a general chat.

An 18-minute talking head explores a serial killer who was a key inspiration. There's also 10 minutes of footage from a 30th anniversary celebration, plus two archival director interviews (2003, 33 minutes/2010, eight minutes), and a music video.

Some bonuses are familiar from the 2012 Blu-ray. In a commentary, Jodorowsky is commendably keen to address what's on-screen, but his accent is a challenge. He also talks through two deleted scenes (seven minutes, no sound). Then there's a 2002 screening Q&A (26 minutes), and a short by another son. The 4K Limited Edition adds a soundtrack CD. **Ian Berriman**



The *Strictly Come Dancing* scandals continued.

> **Surreal sequences are burned into your brain**

During a scene where the young Fenix is tattooed, Jodorowsky hid under a table, pinching eight-year-old son Adan's legs!

HUNDREDS OF BEAVERS

★★★★½ EXTRAS ★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | 12 | Blu-ray/download

Director **Mike Cheslik**

Cast **Ryland Brickson Cole Tews, Doug Mancheski, Olivia Graves, Luis Rico**

Snigger at the title all you like, but you've never seen a film quite like this before. Made for a budget of just $150,000, Mike Cheslik's dialogue-free – though not quite silent – movie is a remarkable feat of filmmaking.

Jean Kayak (Ryland Brickson Cole Tews) is a 19th century applejack salesman whose orchard is destroyed by beavers. Struggling to survive in the frozen wilderness, he stumbles into life as a fur trapper, initially hunting rabbits (played, like all the animals, by actors in cheapo mascot costumes), until he encounters beavers – *hundreds of them* – and embarks on a bizarre sort of one-man war.

Shot in faux old-timey black and white and partially animated, Cheslik's film is visually arresting. There are a lot of special effects here, mostly quite ropey from a conventional point of view, but which make perfect sense within the context of *Hundreds Of Beavers*' strange world.

Both an exercise in avant-garde filmmaking and a slapstick gag-fest, it's also hilarious in its commitment to increasingly elaborate physical set-ups and pay-offs and its unexpected videogame structure. Absurd, deranged and genuinely unique.

Extras Commentary by director Mike Cheslik, and a gallery of behind-the-scenes stills. **Will Salmon**

BRUISER

Blank Regeneration

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2000 | 15 | 4K/Blu-ray

Director **George Romero**

Cast **Jason Flemyng, Peter Stormare, Leslie Hope, Nina Garbiras**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **One of George** Romero's least-seen movies, *Bruiser* is also one of his least characteristic. The milieu it's set in – fashion publishing, with its pool parties and faint whiff of Patrick Bateman – is light years from blue-collar Pittsburgh. The film's glossy sheen is equally alien.

The title refers to a magazine Jason Flemying's put-upon Henry works for. *Faceless* would have been better, the sobriquet he acquires after waking to find his face transformed into an eerie white mask – a blank slate that liberates Henry to enact revenge on all those who've wronged him.

Inspired by 1960's *Eyes Without A Face*, it's a striking central image, but one that's hard to parse. Given some of the muted reactions to this transformation, it might make better sense if it were simply Henry's delusion – but it's captured on CCTV.

With a worm-that-turned tale, maintaining sympathy for the protagonist is key – something *Bruiser* fails to do. It doesn't help that his first victim is a Latina maid killed simply for petty pilfering. And a masquerade party climax featuring punks the Misfits and all manner of S&M gimpwear makes you wonder if someone was having a midlife crisis.

Co-star Peter Stormare needed reining in, too; his performance as Henry's douchebag boss (which includes some improvised dick-flashing...) is cartoonishly OTT. For Romero completists only.

After Howard Jones, Jed was having a tough time.

STUDIO CANAL+

Extras The highlight is a short but sweet interview with Jason Flemying (nine minutes), who shares affectionate memories of Romero. Misfits drummer Dr Chud (nine minutes) supplies a bunch of decent anecdotes – and a soundtrack demo which he never quite summoned up the courage to hand to the director.

A Kim Newman talking head (12 minutes) and an intro from a French box set (10 minutes) provide some critical context. You also get a 2001 Romero/producer commentary, and a candid audio interview with the director (44 minutes, 2013) – a career overview affair. Plus: galleries; trailer; 80-page booklet.

Ian Berriman

i George Romero got the title from his daughter Tina – "bruiser" being a slang word she used, meaning "cool".

DIE, MONSTER, DIE!

Drained of colour

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1965 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Daniel Haller**

Cast **Boris Karloff, Nick Adams, Freda Jackson, Suzan Farmer**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Adapted from HP** Lovecraft tale "The Color Out Of Space", this AIP production bears scant resemblance to the source material. There are no baffled Miskatonic University professors here; no trees swaying despite the absence of a breeze; no "rainbow of cryptic poison" – though you can understand why a low-budget production would struggle to realise the writer's "chromatic perversion" from beyond.

A few key elements do survive – a meteorite, a blasted heath, mutated vegetable and animal life – all slowly revealed as an American (Nick Adams) visits his love interest's country house in Arkham (transplanted from New England to Blighty). But all in all, *Die, Monster, Die!* has more of a Hammer horror vibe, bolting on swooping bats and sinister figures at the window, and swathing it all in cobwebs and mist.

One major draw is the sumptuous production design, which puts Hammer's Bernard Robinson to shame; the Witley estate is crammed with eye-catching statuary and paintings. A second is stern family patriarch Nahum, played by Boris Karloff. Though confined to a wheelchair (due to the actor's arthritis), he still cuts an imposing figure.

If it's "The Color Out Of Space" you're after, though, the 2019 Nic Cage movie – while not exactly rigorously faithful either – comes much closer to capturing its miasmic bad-trip body horror.

"I think we're going to need a bigger vase."

Extras BFI Flipside founders Vic Pratt and William Fowler's commentary is wryly amusing. A 19-minute chat between Pratt and Karloff's biographer focuses on his other work in the '60s. The 1964 short "The Peaches" (16 minutes) has no relevance, but is a charming enough swinging '60s fairy tale.

About all we learn from the film's unit publicist (12 minutes) is that Karloff was a gentleman. Next, two blokes sitting in a kitchen perform a dramatic reading of bits of an unmade screenplay about Nick Adams (14 minutes). Ham levels: in the red. An accompanying discussion (seven minutes) is frustratingly haphazard. Plus: gallery; trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

i Arkham is represented by the village of Shere in Surrey. It also featured in *A Matter Of Life And Death*.

MESSAGE FROM SPACE

Nuts and laser-bolts

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1978 | PG | Blu-ray

Director Kinji Fukasaku

Cast Vic Morrow, Etsuko Shihomi, Philip Casnoff, Peggy Lee Brennan

"Welcome to the Green Party constituency meeting!"

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Given elements** like a bleeping robotic sidekick and a climactic "trench run", you can probably guess the inspiration for this goofy Japanese sci-fi. Rushed into production so fast that it reached Japanese cinemas before *Star Wars*, it mashes up George Lucas's brainchild with homespun historical drama.

After the peaceful folk of Jillucia are invaded by the Gavanas Empire, eight "holy seeds" are sent to find heroes who can help. Japanese viewers would have recognised a nod to 19th century epic novel *Satomi Hakkenden*. For Westerners, all the business with glowing walnuts is rather bemusing.

The plotting is nonsensical, but the film packs in so much incident (as if they crammed everything from the first brainstorm into the script), and is in such constant motion (rendered more frantic by drunken handheld camera), that there's little time to dwell on that.

While it can't match Lucas's production values (the standard is "decent for '70s TV") the explosive spaceship battles are pleasingly zippy. But the highlight is an array of fierce looks: orange shirts and game show host jackets; silver skin and samurai-esque armour; jackets with a medusa's head on the back paired with rainbow braces. Cosplayers after a challenge need look no further.

Extras Choose Japanese or English – as the cast spoke their own languages, both are equally valid. Film writer Tom Mes's commentary is a tad long-winded. A second expert supplies a wry appreciation (14 minutes). A German-made retrospective (30 minutes) dates from 2011. A jovial Sonny Chiba (who played a swordfighting prince) is its highlight; the director's son is the main contributor, but since he was five at the time a critic could have made the same points.

Plus: galleries of over 100 images; four trailers; booklet; poster. **Ian Berriman**

i Actor Sonny Chiba fractured his leg during filming, when he was accidentally struck by a descending metal gate.

SURVIVE

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 30 SEPTEMBER

2024 | 15 | Download

When an eco-disaster hurls the Earth's poles into reverse, a French oceanographer and his family are marooned in a vast, unforgiving desert where the sea once stood – and find themselves the prey of some particularly vicious wildlife.

Played with sincerity, this apocalyptic thriller has moments of effective suspense and some gutsy narrative twists, though the third act lurch into a creature flick feels bolted-on. The story is undercooked, but Moroccan landscapes provide an authentically primeval backdrop. **Nick Setchfield**

PUMPKINHEAD 2: BLOOD WINGS

★★☆☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1993 | 15 | Blu-ray

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Not quite as** awful as its dire reputation suggests, but not, y'know, actually *good*, *Pumpkinhead II* is an incoherent sequel.

The innocent son of the original demon is tortured and killed in the '50s, only to return decades later to take his revenge. It's trashily enjoyable, but lacks any memorable set-pieces and the folk horror atmosphere of the first film.

Extras Two commentaries; two featurettes; BTS footage. **Will Salmon**

SCHLITTER: EVIL IN THE WOODS

★★★½☆

RELEASED 26 AUGUST

2023 | 15 | Download

Turns out going to a cabin in the woods with your friends is a terrible idea, even if it's your childhood home. And even if the reason you're going is to collect what's left of your mementos after a terrible fire killed your parents.

This French thriller is part *Saw*, part *Don't Breathe* and all trauma. It's short and brutal, and packs some nasty surprises. A feel-bad film for sure, but at least you'll learn what a "schlitter" is (mind out of the gutter, please). **Sarah Dobbs**

SKINNED ALIVE

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1990 | 18 | Blu-ray

BLU-RAY DEBUT **This no-budget** horror from the same Ohio stable as zombie flick *The Dead Next Door* follows a family of psychos (one of them *Evil Dead II* co-writer Scott Spiegel).

Told to be "as offensive as possible", director Jon Killough delivers incest, plentiful potty talk, and some truly *appalling* table manners. Though crudely made (a mutilated chest looks like polystyrene), it may tickle fans of exploitation outsiders like Ray Dennis Steckler.

Extras Tons, including three commentaries, nine featurettes and a VHS version. **Ian Berriman**

NOW ON DIGITAL FORMATS *Arcadian • A House In Jerusalem • If • Kingdom Of The Planet Of The Apes • MaXXXine • A Quiet Place: Day One • Sting • The Strangers: Chapter 1 • The Watched*

"Dude, fire up some Hawkwind and let's bake."

REVENGE OF THE BLOOD BEAST

Witch failure, generally

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1966 | 18 | Blu-ray

Director **Michael Reeves**

Cast **Barbara Steele, John Karlsen, Ian Ogilvy, Mel Welles**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **The untimely death** of Michael Reeves in 1968, aged 25, deprived the British film industry of a director whose career was, judging by *The Sorcerers* and *Witchfinder General*, on a steady upward trajectory. The long-overdue release of his debut allows us to extend the line on the time/quality graph backwards.

Shot in Italy, it opens like *Mask Of Satan*: a witch is captured by torch-wielding locals, cursing them as she's drowned. Two hundred years later, British newlyweds honeymooning in Soviet-era Romania (as you do) are caught up in Vardella's vengeance.

Fans of '60s horror will enjoy seeing Reeves regular Ian Ogilvy paired with Barbara Steele, queen of Italian gothic. There are a few witty touches too: when we meet occult expert Count Von Helsing (yes, Von) he's swaying on a swing. And after killing one victim with a sickle, Vandella tosses it aside, only for it to land on top of a hammer. (Hammer and sickle, get it?)

Otherwise, *Blood Beast* disappoints, blighted by illogical plotting (despite much chat about the need to "exorcise" Vardella, no one ever does) and a wavering tone, with the horror undermined by feeble attempts at comedy like a *Keystone Kops*-style car chase.

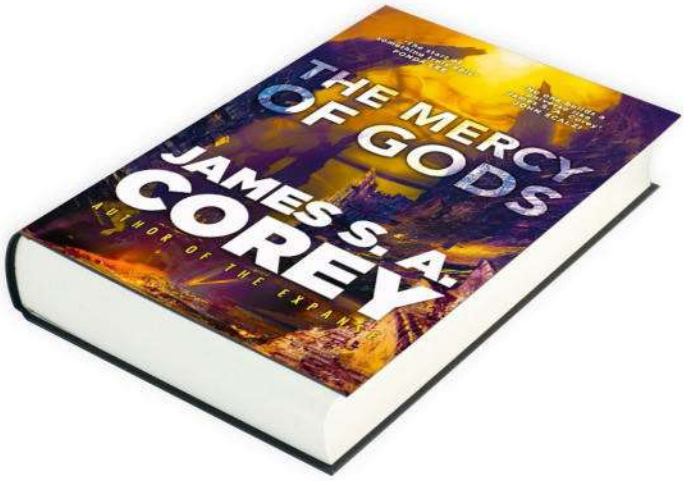
Extras A chatty commentary (from 2007) teams producer Paul M Maslansky and the leads; all are likeably self-deprecatory. Ogilvy is good value in a new interview (13 minutes), describing his acting as "terribly bad". Kim Newman makes a case for the defence (20 minutes), calling the film "*almost* good". An audio interview with Steele (28 minutes) mostly covers her views on directors. Plus: trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

i To save money, the producers pretended they were making a documentary, putting the title *Etruscan Ruins* on clapperboards.

ROUND UP

The Strangers: just friends who haven't killed you yet.

With a deluge of recent movies hitting shiny disc, it's time to supersize this slot. Criminals abduct an underworld figure's daughter in **ABIGAIL** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD), only to discover that she's a bloodsucker. We said: "An undead delight with real teeth, it's a worthy, fresh addition to the vampire genre." Extras: featurettes on the gore, the directors, Abigail, and the kidnappers; deleted scenes; a gag reel (33 minutes' worth). In **THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF MAGICAL NEGROES** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD), a young black man is recruited into an organisation dedicated to making white folk's lives easier – then falls for a white co-worker. We said: "The script is sharp, the satire is salient... Unfortunately, the love story falls a little flat." Director Kobi Libli provides commentary. You also get three short featurettes (14 minutes). Dystopian action comedy **BOY KILLS WORLD** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) sees a deaf-mute man (Bill Skarsgård) trained to exact revenge on the woman who runs the city, after his family's killed. We said: "Revels in its own madness... unlike anything else you'll see this year." Extras: a 17-minute Making Of, and some fleeting promos. In prequel movie **THE FIRST OMEN** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD) a novitiate comes to suspect that the priests at an orphanage in Rome have evil designs on one of her charges. We said: "For all its fidelity, winds up bearing more of a resemblance to one of the *Conjuring* Universe's wimple-wearing spin-offs." Bonuses: featurettes on the protagonist, symbolism, and "the director's vision" (19 minutes). *Fury Road* prequel **FURIOSA: A MAD MAX SAGA** (12 August, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) pits Anya Taylor-Joy against Chris Hemsworth's warlord Dementus, in some blistering all-action set-pieces. We said: "Taylor-Joy is too often sidelined, and the chapter structure saps momentum... Whenever George Miller allows himself to let rip, however, all gripes are forgotten." The Blu-ray has a 57-minute Making of and a look at a big set-piece (11 minutes). The 4K adds featurettes on Furiosa, Dementus and the vehicles (31 minutes). In John Krasinski's **IF** (12 August, Blu-ray/DVD), a 12-year-old girl and an adult (Ryan Reynolds) who can both see imaginary friends team up to reunite sad monsters with their now grown-up pals. We said: "Its world-building makes no sense, and it isn't funny, but you may find a tear in your eye." Eight bonuses (41 minutes), include kid-friendly fare like a "learn to draw" piece. Our reviewer was not impressed by **THE STRANGERS CHAPTER 1** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD, out now). Renny Harlin's revival of the home invasion series, calling it "not just over-familiar but insulting, assuming that reheating the blandest elements of the original will have horror fans on tenterhooks". Extras: producer/actor commentary and two featurettes (28 minutes). In **TAROT** (12 August, Blu-ray/DVD), teens staying in a mansion find a creepy tarot deck, and use it! Uh-oh. Cue a series of accidents. Our verdict: "A frightless *Final Destination* knock-off." Bonuses: two featurettes (13 minutes); gag reel. Finally, the latest TV box sets include **TITANS** Season Four (out now, DVD) and **STAR TREK: DISCOVERY** Season Five (19 August, Blu-ray/DVD).



THE MERCY OF GODS

Anjiin trouble

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
432 pages | Hardback/ebook
Author **James SA Corey**
Publisher **Orbit Books**

Sad to relate, but even many of the best science fiction and fantasy writers struggle to make a living from their writing. This is not, it's safe to say, a problem faced by James SA Corey, the pen name adopted by the writing team of Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck. Since the publication of *Leviathan Wakes* in 2011, the opener in the *Expanse* series, the duo have achieved a level of success most writers can only dream about.

Ever since the sequence came to an end with 2021's *Leviathan Falls*, there's inevitably been a sense of anticipation about what the pair might do next. No need to wonder any more because, at long last, *The Mercy Of Gods* is here.

It's the opening offering in a space opera-cum-alien invasion trilogy (*The Captive's War*) that's packed with action, multiple characters and intrigue. Perhaps a little too much intrigue... It's also, in an odd way, a novel of academia, in that when we're first introduced to the human society on Anjiin, people who have no clear sense of history outlining how they came to be resident on an alien planet, we see events from the perspective of a bickering, competitive community of scientists.

These are people concerned with careers, funding and the minutiae of research, unequal to the task of confronting an alien invasion. Yet when the cockroach-like Carryx descend on Anjiin, their technology making armed resistance futile, the best and brightest are suddenly in demand.

That description certainly applies to Tonner Freis, an expert in Anjiin's silicon-based lifeforms, and his cohorts – including Dafyd Alkhor, set up almost from the off as the trilogy's central character and introduced to us as someone who is a watcher, perhaps neurodivergent, and also in danger of becoming embittered.

The Carryx, who have been waging war for centuries, have a crudely Darwinian view of life. Either the species they encounter are useful or, well, what's the point to them? Freis, Alkhor and others are taken to the Carryx homeworld, where they are set to work, effectively asked to out-research other species.

This involves a nightmare space journey as captives, the grosser details of which – particularly the bits about toiletry arrangements, an underexplored subject in space opera – may linger long in your imagination. Joking aside, these passages are imbued with a sense of claustrophobia that has a kind of finality about it.

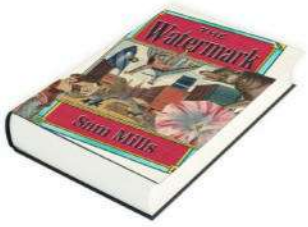
And yet, for the characters we're getting to know, life continues. On the Carryx homeworld, Freis in particular throws himself into a research regime that's not so different to his previous existence, relishing the familiarity.

> **"It's packed with action, multiple characters and intrigue"**

Except, as the ever-observant Alkhor realises, intent on gathering information that will enable him to take revenge against his captors, everything has changed. Fail as researchers and, as is shown in one particularly brutal sequence, the punishment is death. Underpinning all this is a second plot, concerned with "the swarm", even by the end of the novel an enigmatic presence.

Which highlights the book's main weakness, at least when read as a standalone. You long to learn more about the overall plot, but the authors, confident their readers will be patient, are saving up revelations for later. It sometimes functions more like a season of *Lost* than a novel. That reservation aside, this is a superior mainstream SF novel, pacy, filled with big ideas and peopled by characters who demand your attention. **Jonathan Wright**

i When the authors turned in *Leviathan Falls*, they won a bet with George RR Martin that they'd "beat him to the finish".



THE WATERMARK

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
544 pages | Hardback/ebook
Author **Sam Mills**
Publisher **Granta**

If you've ever heard the phrase "lost in a good book" and thought, "Great, where do I sign up?", this one's for you.

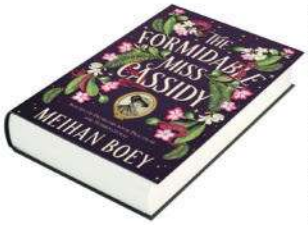
In 2019, graduate student Jaime wins a contest to interview reclusive author Augustus Fate. The man's an oddball, sure, but this could be Jaime's big break into journalism. On the other hand, the tea tastes funny, the woman lying on the bed upstairs looks awfully corpse-like, and he's feeling very sleepy...

Suddenly, it's 1861, he's 14 years old, and his only anchor is Rachel, a governess with an omniscient narrator's voice in her head. Can they escape back home, or are they doomed to jump from book to book forever?

The style and setting change with each jump; each literary world takes us further on in Jaime and Rachel's relationship, and further into science fiction.

There's a 2010s Manchester minus the 2008 banking crash, a future with sentient robots, and a 1920s central European dystopia. The latter is especially well drawn: part snowy, wolf-filled forests and part slow creep towards police state.

It's all good clean metafictional fun – an impressively confident performance with a very clever ending. However, it's a bit too slow and sprawling to really grip, the romance is over-familiar, and Jaime makes for irritating company. **Nic Clarke**



THE FORMIDABLE MISS CASSIDY

★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!
288 pages | Hardback/ebook/
Author **Meihan Boey**
Publisher **One**

Colonial Singapore, 1895. A new governess arrives from Scotland to look after a teenage girl, Sarah Jane, who has been withdrawn since her mother's death. As the book's title says, Miss Cassidy is *formidable*.

Part of this is down to her no-nonsense attitude: despite the heat, she'll muck in with the servants to do chores and eat local food without complaint, all while fending off sexist crap.

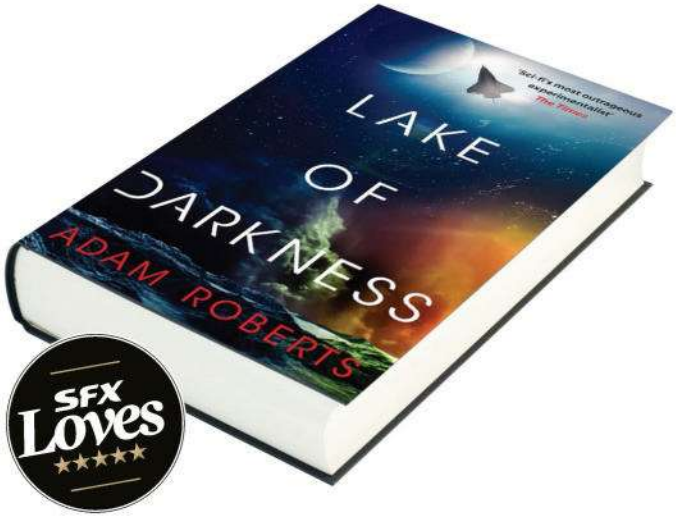
The main thing that makes Miss Cassidy formidable, however, is that she isn't human. This comes in handy when she must outwit a vampire, speak to ghosts or thwart a curse. She's the perfect person to call when you have a supernatural problem; a proto-Ghostbuster in a corset.

Her adventures are all jolly good fun, from the evocative descriptions of steamy Singapore life to the matter-of-fact way Miss Cassidy deals with problems ("Hmm", she mutters time and again, echoing Marge Simpson). Meihan Boey has created a wonderful original character while also retaining her sense of mystery.

If we have one quibble, it's that too much of the last act happens off-camera (so to speak), with a slightly awkward change of POV.

It doesn't make Miss Cassidy any less cool, though. Mary Poppins clearly learnt everything she knew from this gal.

Jayne Nelson



LAKE OF DARKNESS

In the orbit of evil

★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!
320 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Adam Roberts**
Publisher **Gollancz**

The beginning of Adam Roberts's new novel could hardly be more innocuous. Two "Startships" are in orbit around a black hole, "one afternoon". In itself, their presence is evidence of the way humanity long ago spread out among the stars to become a spacefaring civilisation. Here is a utopian future.

Which is when the carnage begins, because *Lake Of Darkness* is at least in part the literary equivalent of that shonky horror space flick *Event Horizon*, a novel that finds eldritch qualities in the sheer weirdness of black holes. So it is that Captain Alpha Raine embarks on a killing spree. He claims he's acting at the behest of a voice emanating from the black hole. Except that can't be possible, because the thing about black holes is that nothing can escape them. Right?

Of course, nobody believes Raine's story and he's imprisoned as a grotesque anomaly. His crimes attract Saccade, a researcher specialising in 21st century serial killers, whose encounter with Raine suggests that a utopia might be susceptible to evil – in great part because its citizens have become infantilised, reliant on AI and even illiterate because the "reading and writing thing" is "a lot of really fiddly work".

From this premise, Roberts spins up a novel that deftly interrogates such disparate topics as fandom, faith and the physics of black holes. Along the way, there are knowing allusions to (to give just a few examples) *King Lear*, Jules Verne, *The Silence Of The Lambs*, "Sympathy For The Devil" and *The Third Man*.

This might all become a little too much, too knowing, were it not for the introduction of Joyns, someone who seems ill at ease in the utopian society she moves through and, almost despite herself, critiques it. As does the character who always lingers on the edge of the action, urbane and ready to intervene when the "nature of his game" (as Jagger sang) demands it... A devilishly creepy and fiendishly clever SF horror novel. **Jonathan Wright**

i *Lake Of Darkness* is dedicated to the late Christopher Priest, whose *Inverted World* had a "manifest influence" on the book.

THE BLACK ORB

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
368 pages | Paperback/ebook
Author **Ewhan Kim**
Publisher **Serpent's Tail**

Something is prowling the streets of Seoul, eating people alive and leaving chaos in its wake. At first, most people manage to get away – the monster moves slowly enough that all you've got to do is run away – but then the threat begins to multiply. People panic, flee, and turn on one another; civilisation breaks down, crime runs rampant... you know the deal.

Basically, the first half of this book is a zombie survival story, but with sinister black orbs instead of the living dead. Then things take a bizarre turn, as two unlikely survivors discover that they're immune to the orbs – but still have to negotiate life in a post-apocalyptic world.

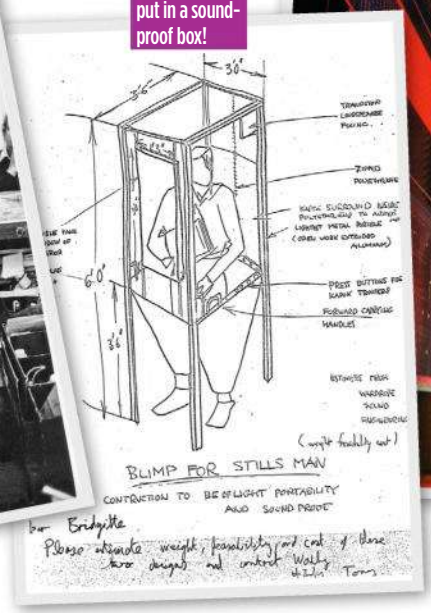
Many of the themes are pretty self-explanatory (or at least they've been thoroughly explained in other media). But there's also some stuff in here that seems to have been lost in the translation from Korean to English, particularly conversations about cultural and sexual norms, and the humiliations of the military. Towards the end, things get extremely, ahem, genital-focused. It makes for uncomfortable reading, without much pay-off.

No one gets any answers about what caused the end of the world, and the chilly tone of the narration, coupled with the bloodless nature of the carnage, means everything ends up feeling as blank and incomprehensible as those spooky spheres. **Sarah Dobbs**

LIFE THROUGH AN APERTURE

Lens flair

Roger Moore uses the camera for *A View To A Kill.*



Kubrick had his photographers put in a sound-proof box!

Kubrick inside the HAL 9000 set on *2001: A Space Odyssey.*

(C) 1985 DANJAC LLC / MGM

★★★★☆

RELEASED 22 AUGUST

288 pages | Hardback

Authors **Keith Hamshere, Gareth Owen**

Publisher **The History Press**

If you can judge someone by the company they keep then maybe the forewords they inspire should also be taken into account. Keith Hamshere would appear to be in stellar company indeed, with no less than Pierce Brosnan, George Lucas and Harrison Ford acting as character witnesses for his autobiography.

The slightly arty title belies a very readable, unpretentious memoir, the story of "just a young lad from London" who went from child star to one of the leading stills photographers in the film industry, working on everything from Bond and *Saturn 3* to *Krull* and *X-Men: First Class*.

Stanley Kubrick hires him for *2001: A Space Odyssey* and the experience is vividly recalled, culminating in a startling show of unpleasantness from the notoriously demanding auteur. Hamshere has no qualms about telling tales out of school: Michael Winner's as obnoxious as everyone says.

At the same time there's an eye for the tiny, telling detail, from Grace Jones's light-fingered tendencies with a crate of Bollinger on *A View To A Kill* to an off-duty Superman playing darts with the crew in Pinewood boozers.

Packed, naturally, with pictures that prove Hamshere's gift for the striking image, this is an enjoyable insider's tour of film history.

Nick Setchfield

Chilling out while shooting *Temple Of Doom.*

Christopher Reeve on the Fortress of Solitude set.

i Kirk Douglas's part in *Saturn 3* was turned down by both Sean Connery and Michael Caine. Not a lot of people know that.

EXTREMOPHILE

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

320 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Ian Green**

Publisher **Head Of Zeus**

Does cyberpunk make any sense in the age of populism? It's a question that may nag at you when reading Ian Green's first SF offering, a novel set in a near-future London where global heating is biting, with the population divided into three colour-coded factions. In the capital's decaying streets, punks Charlie and Parker make a living from dubious biohacking and play music at night.

Enter a group of Green extremists, who want to use Charlie's expertise to save the world. But Charlie is by nature Black – one of those who sees no hope. Powerful Blue forces, those trying to make a buck even as the world burns, are ranged against both Charlie and her idealistic new cohorts. The odds on things working out don't seem great.

Taking its name from the term for an organism adapted to live in hostile environments, *Extremophile* is convincing when it describes day-to-day, nitty-gritty urban extremes. It's less strong when it comes to conjuring up a future history that describes how we get to this point. The old cyberpunk trope of unaccountable corporations doing bad things is doing a lot of heavy lifting – which grates rather in an era of populism, when the threat comes from the political realm.

Still, the good moments are very good, notably the story of how a character called Mole came to be forcibly adapted for life underground. **Jonathan Wright**

THE PHOENIX KEEPER

★★★½☆

RELEASED 13 AUGUST

480 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **SA MacLean**

Publisher **Gollancz**

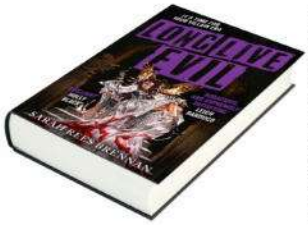
If life is best lived by approaching things with confidence then Aila, the protagonist of SA MacLean's debut, is in trouble. Though she is head phoenix keeper at San Tamculo Zoo, an institution devoted to magical creatures, she is socially inept. In Aila's mind, any contact with other people is inevitably going to end in disaster.

Nevertheless, when, in the wake of a dastardly phoenix heist, the chance for the zoo to become a breeding centre for the critically endangered firebirds presents itself, Aila realises she has to step up and take responsibility. It proves to be difficult because suddenly Aila has to rely on other people, often without even realising it because she's too fixated on her own problems. This doesn't always make her great company from a reader's perspective.

Complicating matters still further: while her friendship with long-suffering bestie Tanya is solid, Aila becomes a gibbering wreck every time she meets handsome colleague Connor. And her relationship with arch-rival griffin keeper Luciana is complicated.

What follows is a queer-romance-cum-foiling-a-heist novel that's charming and humorous, could do with a few more plot twists, and labours a little too long on its central character's acute social anxiety.

Jonathan Wright



LONG LIVE EVIL

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

448 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Sarah Rees Brennan**

Publisher **Orbit Books**

If you could transport yourself into your favourite fantasy novel, would you do it? George RR Martin fans probably know better. But for Rae, being offered the chance to escape into the magical world of her beloved *Time Of Iron* feels like being given a second chance.

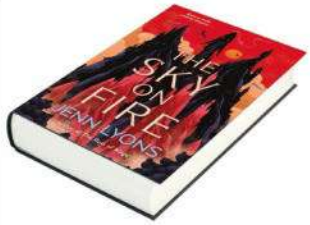
In her reality, she's dying of cancer. In the book's reality, she's the Beauty Dipped In Blood, a sexy villainess who still might meet a sticky end at the end of a sword... but at least here, she's got a chance.

This is billed as Sarah Rees Brennan's first adult fantasy novel, but honestly if there's a difference between this and YA it's hard to find. Which isn't to say it's not fun: Rae runs riot through familiar fantasy conventions, giddily smashing tropes while trying not to mess things up too badly for the main characters.

But Brennan maybe has *too* much fun, at the expense of building a satisfying story. The details are often smart and funny (like the enchanted warhorse that gets named Google Maps, because he always finds his way) but the pacing is uneven and this is very much the first book in a series which you'll be expected to follow.

To make things even worse, the abrupt ending is so infuriating you might end up abandoning Rae to her predicament forever.

Sarah Dobbs



THE SKY ON FIRE

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

434 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Jenn Lyons**

Publisher **Tor**

It's hard to resist a book with a pitch as strong as "heist thriller with dragons", and Jenn Lyons's latest fantasy adventure delivers on its attention-grabbing central idea in a satisfying way.

The first in a new series, the plot follows Anahrod, a jungle-dwelling exile from the dragon-ruled cities known as Seven Crests, who's kidnapped and taken back home as the linchpin of a daring plan.

A group of reprobates, criminals and dragonriders need her help to rob the hoard of the all-powerful dragon regent Neveranimus. As the complications and plot twists mount up, this unashamedly entertaining novel does a great job of building tension while showcasing its intricate world.

Lyons is open about the heavy debt *The Sky On Fire* has to previous fantasy works – most notably, the novels of Anne McCaffrey – but the book still feels fresh thanks to its colourful cast and the central heist thriller concept.

It also helps that she keeps the stakes high without going too dark or edgy, understanding the lurid pleasures of a high fantasy story where dragons are cunning schemers as well as titanic fire-breathers.

There are a couple of points where the plot threatens to sprawl in too many directions, but otherwise this is a great start to a compelling new fantasy saga.

Saxon Bullock

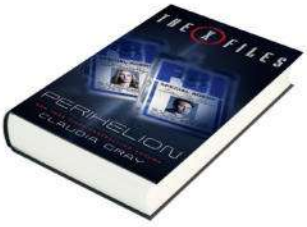
REISSUES

Our pick of the paperbacks this issue is the latest by Lauren Beukes, **BRIDGE** (★★★★★, out now, Penguin). Bridge is short for Bridget, who recently lost her mother – a neuroscientist – to

cancer. Going through her mum's effects, she discovers a "dreamworm" in her freezer: a parasite which allows users to hop between realities by taking over the bodies of alternate selves. We said: "Complex, challenging genre fiction with the pace of a thriller: a gripping, thought-provoking and affecting exploration of means, ends and multiple lives." **SWORD CATCHER** (★★★★☆, out now, Tor) is the first adult fantasy by Cassandra Clare, creator of hit YA series *The Mortal Instruments*. Its dual protagonists are the

bodyguard/lookalike for a prince, and a physician with magical abilities, who are both drawn into the machinations of the criminal underworld trying to bring down the monarchy. We said: "Characters feel three-dimensional, the plot's mysteries unfold in a satisfying way, and even the social politics feel well-handled." Finally, Kelechi Okafor's short story collection **EDGE OF HERE** (★★★★☆, out now, Trapeze) is *Black Mirror*-esque in the way it explores the effects of technological developments (like brain

chips that let feel another person's emotions), but is centred on the black experience – and has more romance than Charlie Brooker's show. We said: "Continually captures the rare magic of genuine connection."



THE X-FILES: PERIHELION

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
352 pages | Hardback/audiobook
Author **Claudia Gray**
Publisher **Hyperion Avenue**

You likely don't remember how *The X-Files* ended its eleventh season. That's okay – almost nobody does, thanks to a truly baffling series of twists and turns from creator Chris Carter that left a bad taste in the mouths of many viewers (and also, notably, Scully actor Gillian Anderson). Plot-wise, this new novel is as convoluted as anything in the show, but it's made enjoyable thanks to a dash of wit and a sense that its author is keen to restore some dignity to these characters.

Paranormal incidents are dramatically on the rise, forcing the FBI to reopen the X-Files yet again. Agents Mulder and Scully, still dealing with the apparent loss of their son, are reinstated and tasked with taking on both a serial killer who targets pregnant women and an assassin who can disappear into thin air. Meanwhile, a new conspiracy is rising from the ashes of the Syndicate.

Perihelion is scrappy. It's elegantly written in some places, and badly in need of a polish in others. One major plot thread wraps up abruptly, while a massive world-changing event is left frustratingly unresolved. That said, it's clear that Claudia Gray loves these characters. She centres Mulder and Scully's relationship in a way that's touching and romantic, and finally succeeds in making something coherent out of Carter's mess. **Will Salmon**

SONGLIGHT

Torch Song Trilogy

SFX Loves

★★★★★

RELEASED 29 AUGUST
480 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Moira Buffini**
Publisher **Faber & Faber**

Post-apocalyptic futures where teens are pitted against oppressive regimes are a ubiquitous theme in YA fiction. But it's rare to see the trope delivered with as much style as it is in *Songlight*, the first instalment of the Torch trilogy. Author Moira Buffini boasts an impressive CV writing for stage and screen, and her captivating debut novel is both a storytelling masterclass and a powerful piece of world-building.

There are echoes of *The Hunger Games*, *The Tripods* and even *The Handmaid's Tale* in the chilling country of Brightland, where humanity's hubris has pushed technology back by centuries. Women are forcibly married off to men conscripted to fight an unending war with the neighbouring Ayland, homosexuality is illegal, and telepaths (known as Torches) keep themselves hidden from authorities who consider them "unhuman". If caught, they'll either be recruited to hunt down others like them, or lobotomised to suppress their so-called "songlight".

> "A powerful piece of world-building"

Buffini shifts the point of view between a quintet of memorable characters: a pair of lovers forced apart by their gifts, a powerful Torch in hiding, an ambitious young soldier and, perhaps most compelling of all, a telepath coerced into working for the most dangerous man in Brightland.

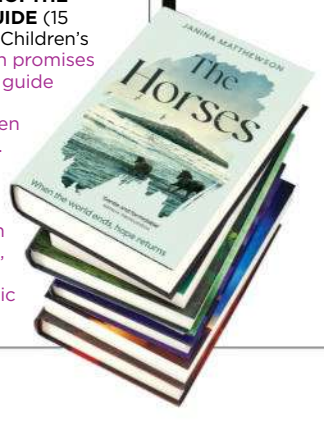
Along the way she effortlessly mixes exposition with the novel's dramatic beats, delivering the major twists and reveals at exactly the right moments. It's remarkable how quickly you invest in the key players and sympathise with the morally ambiguous choices they have to make – whether you're rooting for them or not.

Elements of our present shine through in Buffini's evocative descriptions of the long-gone "Light People" (us) and their achievements, in what's a spectacular introduction to a rich and complex world. It'll be intriguing to see where the series goes next, because *Songlight* feels like the start of something big. **Richard Edwards**

i Buffini will be part of Dystopian YA talks at Waterstones Piccadilly (28 August) and Deansgate Manchester (18 September).

ALSO OUT

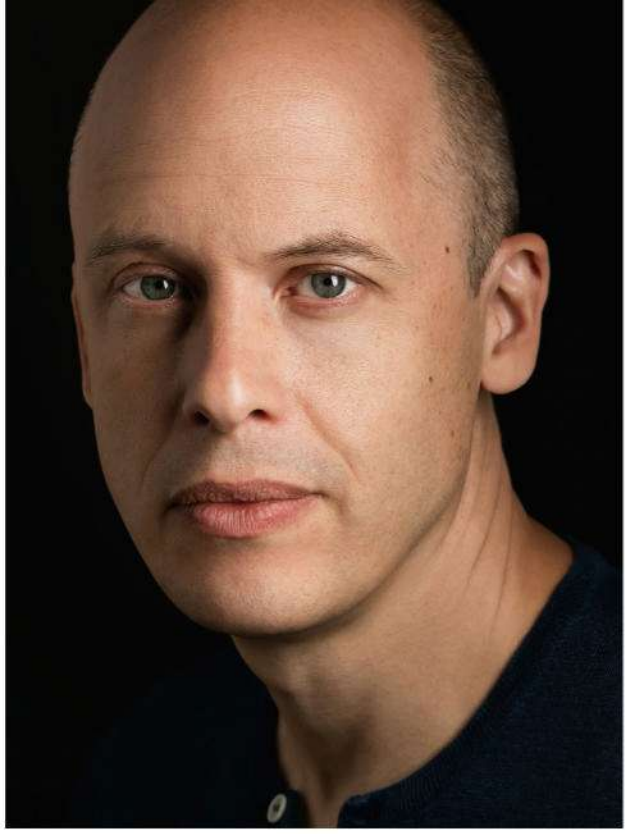
As ever, there's plenty more books we couldn't fit in. Janina Matthewson's literary post-apocalypse **THE HORSES** (out now, Headline) is centred on the inhabitants of a small island. After radios fall silent and the ferry ceases to arrive with supplies, can they work together to survive? Anton Hur's debut **TOWARD ETERNITY** (out now, HarperVia) is set in a near future where a therapy which replaces cells with nanites is eradicating cancer – and where "nano humans" can be created by transferring an AI consciousness into an android body. Paul Kane and Marie O'Regan are the editors of the latest anthology in Flame Tree Press' *Beyond And Within* range. **FOLK HORROR** (20 August) Includes contributions from the likes of Adam Nevill and Stephen Volk; 14 of the 17 are brand spanking new. Sadly embargoes prevented us from reviewing **THE UMBRELLA ACADEMY: THE COMMISSION HANDBOOK** (8 August, Abrams). Offering advice about the hazards of time travel, it's designed to look like an in-universe guide for Commission agents. If you loved our recent *Rentaghost* retrospective, then you should appreciate **IS THAT YOU MAUREEN?** (out now, Ten Acre Films), the memoir of children's TV producer Jeremy Swan. We're crossing our fingers for some red-hot revelations about *Galloping Galaxies!* Finally, younglings are the target demographic for **DOCTOR WHO: THE OFFICIAL GUIDE** (15 August, BBC Children's Books), which promises "the ultimate guide to all of the Doctor's fifteen incarnations". The Fugitive Doctor and the War Doctor are on the cover too, so don't fly into a pedantic rage, now.



THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Lev Grossman

The author of *The Magicians* always ends up emptying the washing machine



BEOWULF SHEEHAN

Describe the room in which you typically write.

I write in the laundry room, in the basement, which sounds very unglamorous but it's quiet and out of the way. You don't get interrupted – people don't just go barging into the laundry room on a whim. The only downside is that you're the first person to know when the laundry's done and needs to be hung out, and it's very hard to think of excuses for not doing it.

Do you have any personal mementos or knick-knacks on your desk?

I wrote a book called *The Golden Swift* where one of the characters was a cassowary. To remind myself how scary cassowaries are, I ordered a 3D-printed cast of a cassowary's foot – they have one extra-long claw on each foot that looks like a dagger. Now I don't know what to do with it, so it sits on my desk.

How do you deal with writers' block/the urge to procrastinate?

Mostly I deal with it by procrastinating. I find *Pokémon Go* is good for that.

Which of your books was the most difficult to write?

My first book. By far. I didn't know what I was doing, and I didn't know if I could do it

> **"My first drafts are made of bad habits. I overdescribe. I swear too much"**

because I'd never done it before. Nobody believed in me. I didn't believe in myself. I had never had any therapy, so mental health was a shambles! Not coincidentally, my first book is also my worst book.

Is there anything about one of your books you wish you could travel back in time and "fix"?

So many things. There are issues I've learned a lot about in the past few years, around mental health and sexuality, that I would handle differently now. Also there's a bit in *The Magicians* where I refer to the characters as "all seven of them" but there's actually eight.

Do you have any writing "bad habits" that you have to keep in check?

Oh my god, my first drafts are *made* of bad habits. I overdescribe. I swear too much. I soft-pedal interesting conflicts because I'm afraid of them. All the characters sound like me. Bad habits are the only kind of habits I have!

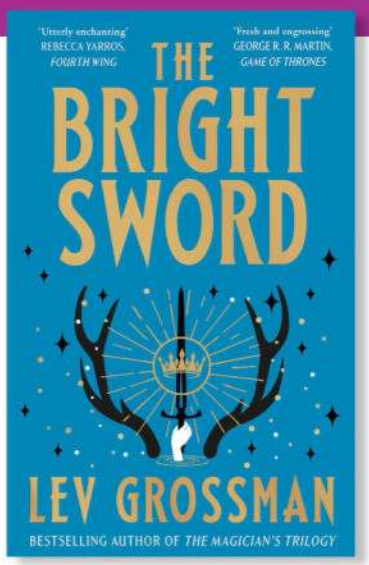
Were you a keen reader as a child? Did you have any particular favourites?

I was a keen reader! It was pretty much the only area in which I was keen. My favourites were *The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe* by CS Lewis, and *The Once And Future King* by TH White. Oh and a now neglected classic, Fritz Leiber's *Fafhrd* and the Gray Mouser books, starting with *Swords And Deviltry*.

What is the biggest misconception people have about being a professional author?

I do think there are a lot of myths around the question of quitting your day job. There's definitely no shame in having a day job. When you've got three kids to feed and house and educate, quitting a good salaried job brings a lot of risk with it.

Writers live book to book, and you never know when they're going to stop selling. I was 47 – and I had three bestsellers and a TV show [*The Magicians*] – before I quit my full-time job.


'Utterly enchanting' REBECCA YARROS, FOURTH WING
'Fresh and engrossing' GEORGE R. R. MARTIN, GAME OF THRONES
THE BRIGHT SWORD
LEV GROSSMAN
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE MAGICIAN'S TRILOGY

Lev Grossman's Arthurian novel The Bright Sword is out now, published by Del Rey.

THE LION, THE WITCH and THE WARDROBE
A Story for Children by C. S. LEWIS
NEW ENGLISH LIBRARY
Swords & Deviltry Fritz Lieber
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THE SPECTACULAR SPIDER-MEN

Two-In-One

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Publisher **Marvel Comics**

Writer **Greg Weisman**

Artists **Humberto Ramos, Victor Olazaba**

ISSUES 1-5 **After being in the same** Earth-616 dimension for eight years, Peter Parker and Miles Morales have now been granted their own ongoing shared title.

It begins with the two resolving to meet every week for a catch-up, with Greg Weisman making some witty references to previous joint Spidey books, as the older wall-crawler insists there will be "no Spider-Men, no team-ups". Weisman also wryly alludes to the fluid time scale of the Marvel Universe as Peter – who first appeared in 1962 – jokes about how he sometimes feels like he's been dropping classic zingers for over 60 years.

Opening with what turns out to be a short-lived fight with the Jackal, the first few issues are initially discombobulating, as Weisman constantly chops between multiple "Then..." "Now..." "Days Later..." and "Meanwhile..."s. You may struggle to get a handle on exactly what is occurring as several characters live out their wildest dreams, hooking up with the person they've long had a crush on – or in the case of Kenny "Kong" McFarlane, miraculously resurrecting his football career after damaging his knee.

Suspicions start to mount when Peter is shown living in marital bliss with the long-deceased Gwen Stacy and their two children, while Miles – who is otherwise dating Tiana Toomes – romances Kamala Khan. With Mysterio initially in the frame, Arcadium, the name of the AI simulation they're all trapped in, makes it obvious that Arcade – along with Mentallo – is behind the Wish Web, which is actually funded by long-time Spidey adversary Hammerhead.

With much of the early action centring on the coffee shop at Empire State University (an impressive double-page spread portraying customers and staff in their caffeinated element), Weisman has assembled an endearing supporting cast that's unique to this book. He's greatly assisted in this by artists Humberto Ramos and Victor Olazaba, who combine imaginative layouts with deft body language,

You gotta keep those webs apart, chaps.
YEAH, WELL, YOU GOTTA ADMIT FINDING SHIFT AND THE VERMIN MADE FOR A PRETTY BIG DISTRACTION.
THAT'S NO EXCUSE. BUT THEIR SEWER IS EXACTLY WHERE WE LOST TRACK OF CED...
...SO MAYBE THAT'S WHERE WE'LL PICK UP HIS TRAIL.
AND MAYBE THE KEY TO FINDING KENNY AND SHELLY TOO.

> **"You may struggle to get a handle on what is occurring"**

while the numerous action sequences are depicted with dynamism and flair.

Five issues into this opening seven-parter, the plot is slowly starting to come together – although there are still plenty of loose ends, including the identity of a burned corpse discovered by the police, and what exactly the original Jackal's brother Professor Raymond Warren and his partner Dr Seymour Krepps have to do with what unfolds.

While Weisman's scatological humour about Krepp's unfortunate name is indicative of its gloriously irreverent tone, much of *The Spectacular Spider-Men*'s appeal lies in the strong, ever-changing relationship between the younger and older Webheads. **Stephen Jewell**

i Chris Claremont and John Byrne pitted Spidey and Captain Britain against Arcade in 1977's *Marvel Team-Up* issue 66.

WHAT IF...? ALIENS

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Publisher **Marvel Comics**

Writers **Paul and Leon Reiser, Adam F Goldberg, Hans Rodionoff**

Artist **Guiu Vilanova**

ISSUES 1-5 **Applying its classic** *What If...?* formula to the creepy outer space denizens of its 20th Century Studios imprint, this five-parter is based on an idea by *Aliens* actor Paul Reiser and his son Leon, which speculates on what might have happened if his character Carter Burke had survived the xenomorph infestation that devastated Hadley's Hope.

Mostly set 35 years after *Aliens*, it emulates the location of many other spin-off novels and comics, taking place on a terraformed asteroid where the disgraced corporate stooge-turned-operations manager now ekes out a humdrum existence.

The story is infused with a surprising amount of humour, and despite his nefarious intentions you can't help but find the hapless Burke endearing, as the co-writers establish a vibrant chemistry between him, his daughter Bree and Shin Yutani's errant son Hiro. There's also a recurring *Blade Runner*-inspired gag regarding Carter and his often deadpan synthetic Cygnus.

Centred on a plot to impregnate an unfortunate individual using a Facehugger, there's a *Fargo*-esque quality to Carter's ill-conceived scheme, which inevitably descends into bloodshed and mayhem. With Guiu Vilanova combining fluid linework with some suitably grisly visuals, this ranks as the best of Marvel's *Alien* output to date. **Stephen Jewell**

MAN'S BEST

★★★★★

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **BOOM! Studios**
Writer **Pornsak Pichetshote**
Artist **Jesse Lonergan**

ISSUES 1-5 **This miniseries is an** easy pick for any Best of 2024 lists. Sometime in the future, a spaceship carrying a few scattered survivors flees a warring Earth. As well as the humans – notably the nameless Captain and scientist Doc – the ship includes a trio of animals: Labrador Porthos, cat Athos and Boston Terrier Lovey.

Doc has been training these three emotional support pets to fight the fearsome robotic "Klangers". When their ship crashes, however, and the animals become separated from the humans, the three must fend for themselves on a strange new world.

While the ingredients here are familiar – there are echoes of other animal POV comics, like *Pride Of Baghdad* and especially Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely's *We3* – Pornsak Pichetshote and Jesse Lonergan are doing something refreshingly different here.

The "human settlers search for a new home" premise is the stuff of golden age SF, but the series also goes to some unexpectedly strange places, with Lonergan's appealingly cartoony art growing more psychedelic with each issue, while Pichetshote's script tugs at the heartstrings.

The simple message that things get better when people (and cats, dogs, and aliens) work together is a simple one, but *Man's Best* tells it in a way that's exciting, funny and deeply heartfelt. **Will Salmon**

THE BOY WONDER

Batman's son takes centre stage

★★★★½

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **DC Black Label**
Writer/artist **Juni Ba**

ISSUES 1-3 **Despite first appearing** in 2006 (no, pedants, a single drawing of a nameless baby in 1987's *Son Of The Demon* does *not* count as an introduction), current Robin Damian Wayne (the son of Bruce and Talia al Ghul) has quickly become one of the most recognisable characters in the Batman canon. This wonderful DC Black Label miniseries from writer/artist Juni Ba reimagines his story as a charming and amusingly violent fairy tale.

With Batman himself temporarily out of the picture, Damian takes it upon himself to investigate rumours of a demon haunting the streets of Gotham. Unfortunately, his impetuous nature immediately lands him in a lot of trouble, forcing his brothers – the other Robins – to step in.

> **"Damian investigates rumours of a demon"**

Ba's super-stylised art is glorious. There's an obvious manga influence on his work, but he most clearly echoes Genndy Tartakovsky with his sense of constant motion and cartoony, exaggerated proportions. Matched with Chris O'Halloran's bold colours, this is a very handsome comic indeed, but it's also one that works as an incisive examination of Damian.

The character was originally introduced as a child assassin and a lethal counterpart to Batman. *The Boy Wonder*, however, hones in on the psychological damage done to him by his grandfather Ra's al Ghul and the conflicted longing and disdain he feels for his adoptive family. For all its stylish action and violence, the series' most effective moments come when Ba exposes the scared and vulnerable child beneath Robin's domino mask. **Will Salmon**

i Some of Juni Ba's inspirations included *Taxi Driver*, *One Thousand And One Nights* and 19th century illustration.

THE SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Titan Comics**
Editors **Phoebe Hedges, Calum Collins**
Artists **Various**

ISSUES 1-3 **The recent Titan** Comics relaunch of Conan the Barbarian has now gone one step further with a throwback to the classic Marvel era of Robert E Howard's pulp hero. *The Savage Sword Of Conan* was a long-running, magazine-sized, black-and-white anthology title in the '70s. This new incarnation follows the same format, tapping into the expected style of muscular, bloodthirsty action.

These first three issues feature text stories, interviews and a back-up strip starring Howard character Solomon Kane, but it's the lengthy standalone tales following Conan's adventures that are the main attraction.

They pitch Conan against dinosaurs, monstrous elder gods and werewolves, while also pulling off an entertaining mix of simmering suspense and kinetic thrills, and the strong black-and-white visuals give them an extra sense of atmosphere and edge.

There's a different creative team each issue. All three so far have been largely successful in the way they tap into Howard's lurid style of fantasy, but there's a definite highlight in Jim Zub and Richard Pace's doomy issue two adventure "Leaving The Garden". While it never enters "essential reading"' territory, *Savage Sword* is still a vivid burst of lurid pulp fiction that truly entertains. **Saxon Bullock**

ELDEN RING: SHADOW OF THE ERDTREE

A ringing success

★★★★½

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Reviewed on **PS5**

Also on **PS4, Xbox Series S|X, Xbox One, PC**

Publisher **Bandai Namco**

VIDEOGAME **Two years on, *Elden Ring*** – the collaboration between *Dark Souls* developer FromSoftware and *Game Of Thrones* author George RR Martin – hasn't strayed far from our minds, thanks to the compelling lore hidden throughout its huge open world, and its demanding combat against massive, dangerous bosses. This expansion, um, expands on that – but also goes a long way towards improving what came before.

Travelling to the Land of Shadow, a portion of the main game's Lands Between annexed to another plane of reality, you gradually uncover a huge and dense map, containing 11 major bosses (the base game has 15). There's enough here that you could almost consider *Shadow Of The Erdtree* a sequel to *Elden Ring*.

That comes across in the game design as well, which feels genuinely iterative rather than just bolting on more of the same. The world map more seamlessly integrates into world exploration, aided by an even more freeform set-up that doesn't force you to follow a set order of boss fights.

There are still plenty of mini-dungeons to stumble upon, hidden in caves, but now their design is more varied, and the various story elements are threaded through them, reducing the amount of repetition. You can even find freshly forged weapons that introduce whole new fighting styles – from learning martial arts, to a twirling Dancing Blade, and even Dueling Shields that allow you to attack *while* defending. And these new combat styles can be brought out of the expansion, giving the base game a new lease of life.

While George RR Martin hasn't penned anything new for *SOTE*, the expansion plays more directly with his ideas than the base game did. The Land of Shadow was hidden as it contains secret truths about the rule of the Elden Lord, meaning you get plenty more backstory here – which is exactly what Martin was responsible for (having written a worldbuilding bible for the land's history). Never-before-seen NPCs have also been beckoned to the Land of Shadow, and their quests weave through the boss fights more elegantly than before. It's an expansion so good it improves on the original. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

ℹ What's the deal with the jar people? *Shadow Of The Erdtree* reveals all – and it's nothing to do with jam!

Put these foolish ambitions to rest, Tarnished.

WARHAMMER: AGE OF SIGMAR

Fourth Edition

★★★★½

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Players **Two+ players**

Publisher **Games Workshop**

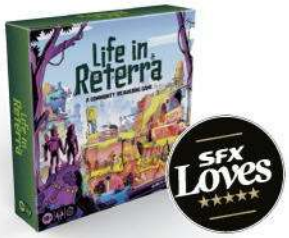
TABLETOP GAME **Long-running** games are like trees; the older they get, the more tangled their roots become. Even though *Age Of Sigmar* is young so far as the *Warhammer* library goes (it first hit shelves in 2015), nine years is still long enough for its rules to have become knotted. This new Fourth Edition trims all that back.

It takes a leaf from *Warhammer 40,000*'s book. That game's Tenth Edition stripped away the chaff for a more streamlined experience, and its "Combat Patrol" match type with pre-balanced armies catered to anyone put off at the thought of afternoon-long battles. *Age Of Sigmar* has wisely half-inched both ideas for its 2024 facelift, providing more accessible rules, alongside a "Spearhead" mode that can be played in a lunch break.

This revitalises the game. Its mechanics are now more digestible than before, and even though veterans will recognise the basic structure, newcomers should meet less resistance when learning its ins and outs.

A modular approach to mechanics is a similarly good idea; you can stick to the basics with Core Rules, or add Advanced Rules for more complex set-tos. If you want to get involved, grab the *Skaventide* box (which we'd recommend) or one of the upcoming starter sets.

Ben Abbott



LIFE IN RETERRA

★★★★★

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Players **Two to four**
Ages **10+**
Publisher **Hasbro Gaming**

BOARDGAME **It's rare that you** finish a game and immediately want to tell your friends about it. *Life In Reterra* is one of those games.

Coming from the minds of industry legend Eric M Lang and his longtime collaborator Ken Gruhl, this is a story in which the world has ended. But don't assume it's one of those post-apocalypses featuring hits such as "Everything Is Terrible" and "The Real Monsters Are Us, Actually". Instead, this is a vibrant and colourful landscape where nature has reclaimed the Earth.

What remains of humanity (aka the players) must make new civilisations among this wreckage, building schools from the likes of planes, or football fields on satellite dishes (the Jodrell Bank kind, not your Sky dish). Everyone gets along here, and ingenuity is the order of the day.

In terms of how that translates to gameplay, *Life In Reterra* takes a pinch of some all-time greats and then mixes them together, borrowing the tile placement of *Carcassonne* and blending it with *Wingspan*'s engine-building system. This leaves you with a straightforward but satisfying puzzle to solve every match, where you're trying to create the ultimate chain reaction of points.

Combined with the game's delightful cartoon art style, this results in something that's truly special.

Ben Abbott

DOCTOR WHO: THE LOST STORIES

Tangent timeline TARDIS tales

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
138 minutes/153 minutes | CD/download
Publisher **Big Finish**

AUDIO DRAMA **Big Finish's** occasional range of "lost stories" – *Doctor Who* tales that were either scripted but never filmed, or existed solely as ideas or pitches – returns with two new tales.

Deathworld ★★½☆☆ is based on an early attempt by Bob Baker and Dave Martin at what would eventually become 1973's "The Three Doctors". The First, Second and Third incarnations of the Time Lord are seemingly killed, and find themselves transported to a realm controlled by a personification of Death itself. It's big and silly, classic *Who* anniversary fare for better and worse, with the sprawling story encompassing multiple Doctors and companions.

Tim Treloar's take on Third Doctor Jon Pertwee remains uncanny – when teamed with Jon Culshaw's Brigadier and Katy Manning's Jo Grant, it really does feel like you're listening to an episode of mid-'70s *Who*. Stephen Noonan's impression of William Hartnell, by contrast, is a collection of exaggerated verbal ticks that's borderline frightening. Happily, Michael Troughton does an excellent impression of his dad.

Troughton is also the star of the second release, **Operation Werewolf** ★★★★☆. Douglas Camfield and Robert Kitts's serial made it to the outline stage and a draft was written for the first episode before it was canned. Jonathan Morris's adaptation completes a story set against the backdrop of the D-Day landings, as the Nazis obtain teleportation technology and plan their own invasion.

The cast are excellent, and while the story feels overlong at six episodes (an era-appropriate sin at least) it's a hugely enjoyable jaunt through pulp WW2 tropes.

Will Salmon

Operation Werewolf is named after a real Nazi plan to create a resistance force that would operate behind enemy lines.

D&D: QUESTS FROM THE INFINITE STAIRCASE

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
224 pages | Hardback/digital book/ virtual tabletop/PDF
Lead designer **Justice Ramin Arman**
Publisher **Wizards Of The Coast**

ROLEPLAYING GAME ***Dungeons & Dragons*** is at its best when it strays off the beaten path... or gets weird.

That was certainly the case with anthologies like *Candlekeep Mysteries*, and the same is true here.

Rounding up a handful of classic adventures (first published between 1977 and 1984) that have been refreshed for the modern game, *Quests From The Infinite Staircase* is a reminder of just why those stories were so beloved.

Partly that comes down to the fact that some of them are batshit insane. The more you read, the more you're drawn in. Even when you're dealing with well-worn tropes, leftfield twists keep things interesting. That traditional dungeon crawl at the beginning, for instance? You'll find mildly unhinged societies who locked themselves away after an apocalypse layered over the top.

This is far from an isolated incident, but the best example would be when your swords 'n' sorcery group is drawn into a crashed spaceship packed with laser guns and robots.

The latter story ("Expedition To The Barrier Peaks") is so far removed from anything else *D&D* is doing at the moment that it should revitalise even the most jaded adventurer.

Ben Abbott

Blastermind
The SFX quiz

ALIEN

It's been 158 issues since we last did a quiz on the *Alien* franchise, so it's probably about time for another one, right?

Quizmaster **Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor**

QUESTION 1
In the original film, what is the name of Ripley's cat?

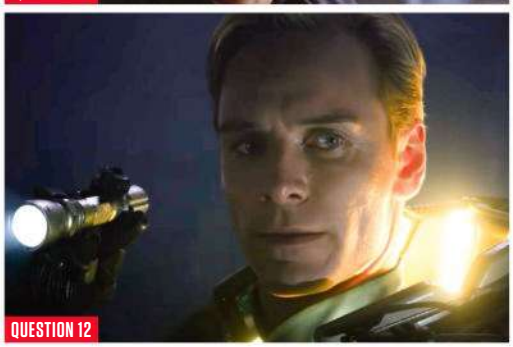
QUESTION 2
In *Aliens*, what's the name of the human colony on LV-426?

QUESTION 3
In *Alien 3*, why is the warden's assistant Aaron given the nickname "85"?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
Name this android character.

QUESTION 5
Who wrote the screenplay for *Alien: Resurrection*?

QUESTION 6
The end credits of *Alien Vs Predator* give the titular creatures names. Which of these refers to an Alien (rather than a Predator)? Celtic, Chopper, Grid, Scar.



QUESTION 7
How many *Alien* movies has Lance Henriksen appeared in?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question
Name this android character.

QUESTION 9
Altogether, how long does it take from the activation of the self-destruct system on the Nostromo to the ship exploding?

QUESTION 10
Which character in the franchise is the first to use the word "xenomorph" on-screen?

QUESTION 11
In *Alien: Covenant*, which classic song features in the transmission picked up by the crew of the Covenant?

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
Name this android character.

QUESTION 13
Which actor was originally cast in the role of Kane, but then had to be replaced by John Hurt after falling ill?

QUESTION 14
Which trainer brand manufactured the high-top shoes worn by Ripley in *Aliens*?

QUESTION 15
Which author wrote the 2021 novelisation of William Gibson's unproduced screenplay for *Alien 3*?

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
Yes, you've guessed it... name this android character.

QUESTION 17
What impressive sporting feat does the cloned Ripley pull off in *Alien: Resurrection*? (Sigourney Weaver did it in one take too!)

QUESTION 18
Who is the main protagonist of the 2014 survival horror videogame *Alien: Isolation*?

QUESTION 19
In which American state do the events of *Aliens Vs Predator: Requiem* take place: Colorado, Nebraska or Ohio?

QUESTION 20
In which *Doctor Who* episode does the Doctor say that calling a horror movie *Alien* is "really offensive" (adding "No wonder everyone keeps invading you")?

Answers
1 Jones 2 Hadley's Hope 3 It's his IQ 4 Bishop 5 Joss Whedon 6 Grid 7 Three (*Aliens*, *Alien 3*, *Aliens Vs Predator*) 8 Call (Annalee Call) 9 15 minutes 10 Lieutenant Gorman 11 "Take Me Home, Country Roads" 12 David 13 Jon Finch 14 Reebok 15 Pat Cadigan 16 Ash 17 Throwing a basketball through a hoop backwards 18 Amanda Ripley 19 Colorado 20 "Last Christmas"

How did you do?

How developed are you?

0-5
Egg

6-10
Facehugger

11-15
Chestburster

16-19
Adult drone

20
Queen

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"I'm feeling quite Y2K-nostalgic"

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IN THE NEXT ISSUE

WITCH, PLEASE! IT WAS... AGATHA ALL ALONG
(WE HAVEN'T FORGOTTEN SPARKY)

THE DEVIL'S HOUR
MORE REALITY-BENDING MYSTERY

THE WALKING DEAD
DARYL AND CAROL REUNITED

SFX 383 ON SALE 4 SEPT

THE TRIPODS
CELEBRATING 40 YEARS

JOKER: FOLIE À DEUX
WE'RE GOING GAGA

PLUS! DOCTOR WHO! ROBOTS! LEGO!

All contents are subject to change, and you'll know whose fault it is

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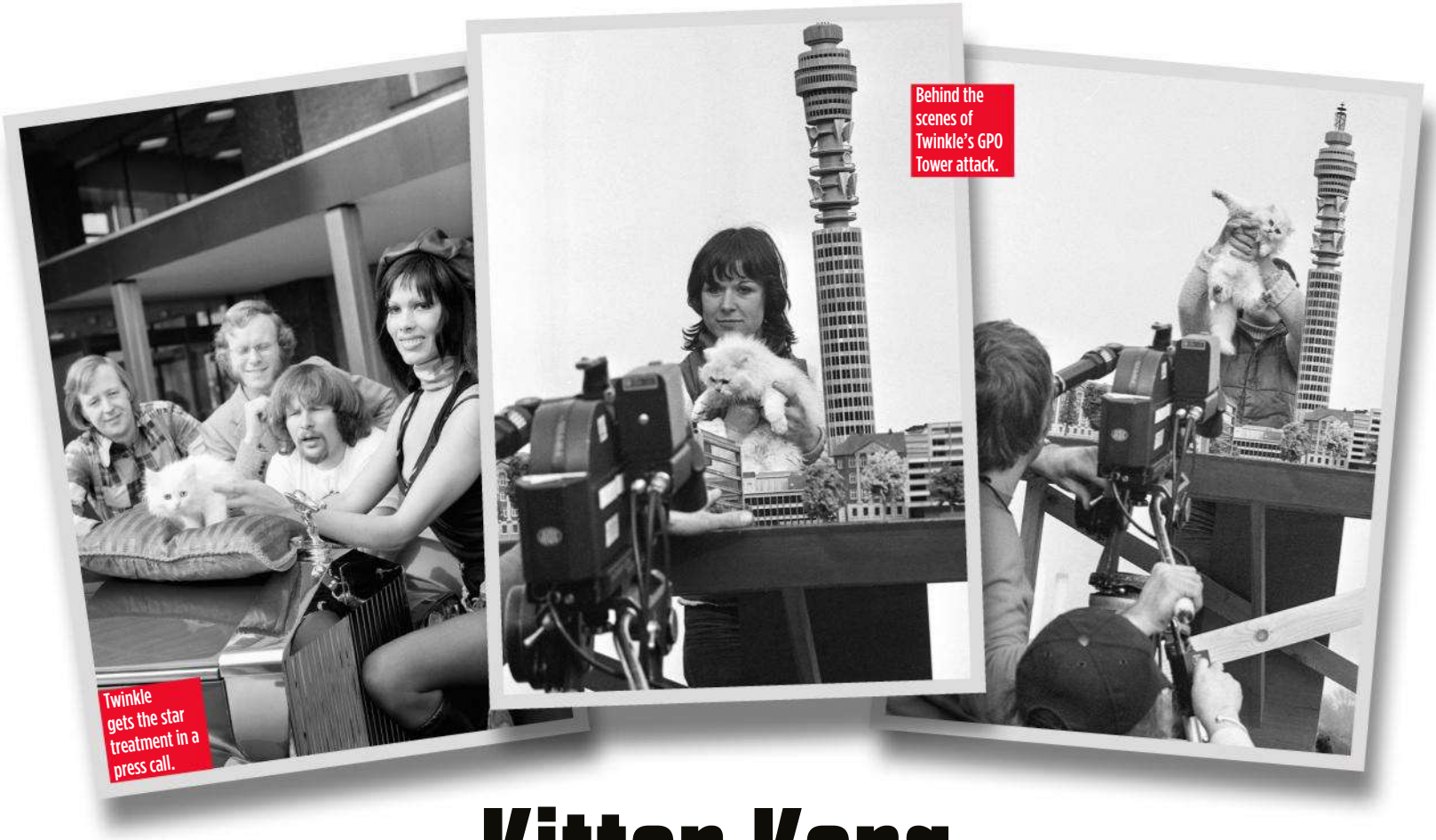
Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy



Twinkle gets the star treatment in a press call.

Behind the scenes of Twinkle's GPO Tower attack.

Kitten Kong

Jayne Nelson, freelance writer

"Kittens are so cute. I wouldn't mind if one came out of St Paul's Cathedral and squashed me."

No, not this isn't some kind of Gen Z sexual innuendo; it's a comment left underneath a YouTube video featuring *The Goodies*' greatest creation. Half a century later, only 91-year-old national treasure Michael Aspel can testify as to how such a squashing would feel – he was, after all, the news reporter pounded into the ground by a gigantic pussy paw.

Aspel-crusher Twinkle, aka Kitten Kong, was the star of an episode from the second series of *The Goodies*. After gorging on metabolism-boosting food and being unleashed upon an unsuspecting London, Twinkle stomps innocent humans, cracks the dome of St Paul's and climbs the Post Office Tower. A regular inclusion in the opening titles, she became an emblem of the show's silliness. The effects are terrible, obviously, but the worse this kaiju-sized kitty looks, the funnier it is.

The episode has the odd distinction of having been made twice. The original was aired in November 1971 but (like so much in the BBC's archives) has since been wiped. The "Kitten Kong" which survives today is a more polished, expanded version, produced for submission to the Montreaux Television Festival in 1972. The original Twinkle features, but another cat was used to update some shots, offering, as Tim Brooke-Taylor boasted, "50% more Twinkle footage!"

As a child growing up in Devon, my knowledge of our nation's capital was assembled from glimpses on TV screens: from the higgledy-piggledy skyline of landmarks on the Thames TV logo to the exterior of Television Centre (in the rustic-sounding "Shepherd's Bush"!). However, it was this giant kitten's rampage through a model version of London that created my most lasting impression of the city. This was London, as far as my childhood self was concerned: a mythical place where pointy buildings could be taken down by Godzilla-sized felines.

It was serendipitous, then, that I eventually ended up working in the shadow of that iconic landmark, now known as the BT Tower. I can say, hand on heart, that a day didn't pass when I didn't look up and picture a gargantuan Twinkle, her paw poised to squash us all.

Jayne hopes that a commemorative blue plaque will one day adorn the BT Tower.

Fact Attack!

- Shooting a park scene, Tim was pulled along the ground via stop-motion... through dog poo. "The most horrendous moment of my life," he said.
- Bill Oddie had previously offered that kitten-walking sketch to Ronnie Barker, who said he wasn't fit enough to do it. Probably for the best...
- Michael Aspel looked back on his appearance fondly, saying, "I get regular cheques from the BBC for 37p from every time they show it."
- Bill Oddie was forced to re-record the line "Bloody hell!" as "Ruddy hell!", much to his annoyance. It was muted entirely in Australia.
- Twinkle the kitten made a return in the 1982 episode "Change Of Life", chasing The Goodies again as one of a series of tests set by a robot.

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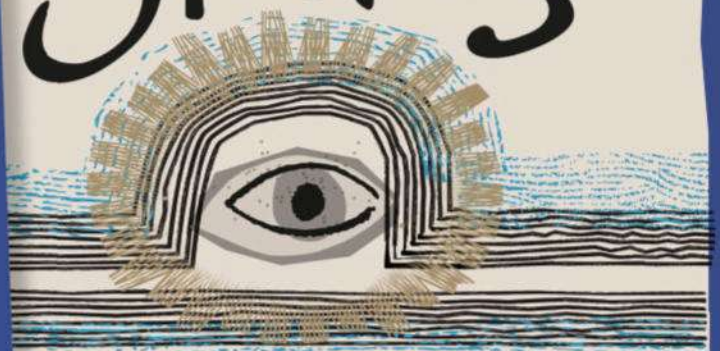
Death in the STARS



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